BEOWULF: The Adventure Begins This Fall SEE PAGE 8

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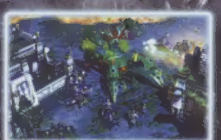

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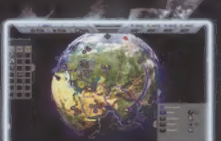

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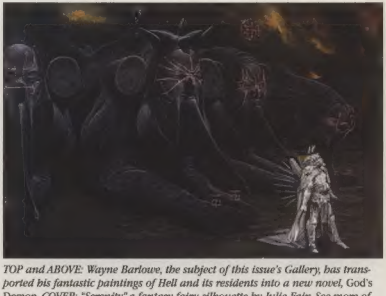

TOP and ABOVE: Wayne Barlowe, the subject of this issue's Gallery, has transported his fantastic paintings of Hell and its residents into a new novel, God's Demon. *COVER: "Serenity," a fantasy fairy silhouette by Julie Fain. See more of her work at www.juliefainart.com.*

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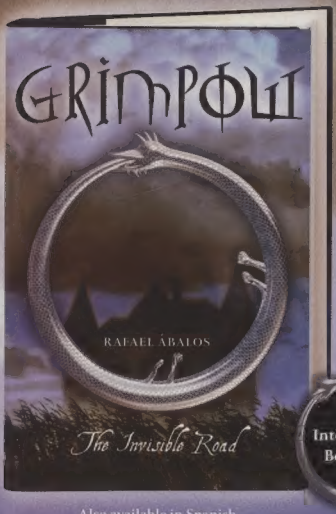

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VIRGINIA BORGES is a recent graduate of Harvard University, where, though a psychology major, she quickly found a second home in the department of Folklore and Mythology. She is now a writer, a career for which she is finding a childhood spent reading Lang fairy books to be an excellent foundation.

Murphy

JOE MURPHY lives in Fairbanks, Alaska, with one wife, two dogs, and three cats. But he grew up in Quanah, Texas, not far from Sprokly's home. Curious readers can aim their browsers at *www.mosquitonet.com/~jmurphy/index/Page_1.html*.

VON CARR is the pen name of Siobhan Carroll, a doctoral student at Indiana University. When not fretting about her dissertation, she writes stories for magazines like *Son & Foe* and *On Spec*. She also hatches mad schemes for world domination, but these have yet to bear fruit.

RICHARD PARKS's first pro sale was published in *Amazing Stories* in 1981 and, after a 13-year hiatus, his second story appeared in *Science Fiction Age* in 1994. Since then his work has appeared in *Asimov's SF, Realms of Fantasy, Weird Tales, Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet,* and *Black Gate*, as well as anthologies such as *Not of Woman Born*, *Robert Bloch's Psychos*, and *Year's Best Fantasy*. His second story collection, *Worshiping Small Gods*, was published by Prime Books in April 2007. PS Publishing in the UK brought out his novella, *Hereafter, and After*, in a signed limited edition this past March.

Parks

RESA NELSON is a Clarion graduate and has sold short fiction to *Science Fiction Age, Fantasy Magazine, Brutarian Quarterly, Oceans of the Mind, Paradox*, and several other magazines and anthologies. Her first novel, *The Dragonslayer's Sword*, is slated for publication in late 2007 by Mundania Press. *The Dragonslayer's Sword* is based on her short story by the same name, originally published in *Science Fiction Age* and voted second in that magazine's first Top Ten Readers Poll. Visit her website at *http://resanelson.com*.

Dragoncharm, **GRAHAM EDWARDS**'s first novel, was published in 1995, 30 years after he was born in Somerset. He grew up on England's south coast and hates going too long between visits to the sea. A few books further down the line, he now lives in Nottingham, which is about as far away from the sea as you can get. He hasn't figured that out yet. Graham trained as a designer and, over the years, he has occupied himself with graphic design, theme park rides, computer animation, comic strips ... oh, and writing the occasional novel. For more about Graham, visit: *www.grahamedwardsonline.co.uk*.

Edwards

SANDRA MCDONALD's first novel, *The Outback Stars*, was published in April by Tor with two sequels to follow. She also writes short stories, and sometimes editors buy them and readers enjoy them. She is a graduate of scenic Ithaca College and the University of Southern Maine, where she studied with great writers including James Patrick Kelly and Dennis Lehane. The U.S. Navy commissioned Sandra as an officer and sent her on various and odd (mis)adventures to Guam, Newfoundland, and Key West; since then, people have paid her to be a Hollywood assistant, software instructor, bureaucrat, and college professor. She has stories forthcoming in *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine* and *Space & Time*. Learn more about Sandra at *http://homepage.mac.com/samcdonald*.

JEFF VANDERMEER grew up in the Fiji Islands and spent six months traveling through Asia, Africa, and Europe before returning to the United States. These travels have deeply influenced his fiction. VanderMeer's book-length fiction has been translated into 15 languages, while his short fiction has appeared in several year's best anthologies and short-listed for Best American Short Stories. A two-time winner of the World Fantasy Award, VanderMeer has also been a finalist for the Hugo Award, the Philip K. Dick Award, the International Horror Guild Award, the British Fantasy Award, the Bram Stoker Award, and the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award. His most recent books have made the year's best lists of *Publishers Weekly, The San Francisco Chronicle, The Los Angeles Weekly, Publishers' News*, and Amazon.com. VanderMeer has edited or co-edited several anthologies, including the critically acclaimed *Leviathan* series, *Best American Fantasy*, and *The Thackery T. Lambshead Pocket Guide to Eccentric & Discredited Diseases*. He also writes for *The Washington Post Book World, Publishers Weekly, SF Weekly, Bookslut, The SF Site, Locus Online*, and many others. He lives in Tallahassee, Florida, with his wife, Ann, and three cats.

VanderMeer

PAUL WITCOVER was born in Zurich, Switzerland, in what is now a mental institution. He was the first infant to fly from Paris to New York aboard a commercial jetliner. He currently lives in New York City, where he works as a freelance editor and writer. His first novel, *Waking Beauty*, was chosen by *Locus* as one of the outstanding first novels of 1997. His second novel, *Tumbling After*, was published by HarperCollins in January 2005. In 2006 Dark Horse Press published his third novel, *Dracula: Asylum*, a "semi-sequel" to the Tod Browning film starring Bela Logosi.

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DEALER INQUIRES ARE WELCOME!

By Nesa Nelson

Beowulf's heroics make for a lively and exciting motion-capture/live-action film.

Roger Avary (*Silent Hill, Pulp Fiction*) has had *Beowulf* on his mind for a long, long time. Ten years ago he teamed up with Neil Gaiman to write a screenplay based on the Anglo Saxon epic poem (that's said to date back to the 700s) after having mulled it over for decades. Look for it theaters on November 16 from Paramount Pictures as a motion-capture, live-action film starring Angelina Jolie (*Tomb Raider*), Anthony Hopkins (*The Silence of the Lambs*), John Malkovich (*Eragon*), Ray Winstone (*King Arthur*), and Crispin Glover (*Back to the Future*).

"It's been a long gestating vision," Avary says. "Even before Neil came aboard, I'd been working on it since 1982. I, like most people, was handed *Beowulf* in high school English, and opened it up and looked at it and thought, 'Oh, my God—what is this?' And I looked at the cover and thought, 'OK. There's a guy with a sword and a dragon—I'm going to like this.'

"I struggled intensely with it until I realized that you can't just read *Beowulf*. You have to read *Beowulf* out loud. And that's when it clicked with me. *Beowulf* can't be assimilated—at least, not by me—just by reading. You really need to speak it. The oral history of *Beowulf* is well known. It existed for hundreds of years before ever being put to paper. And the power in the language derived from the actual spoken word. I realized, this is one of the oldest and greatest stories ever told. It's got monsters. It's got guys with swords. It's got action. It's epic. What's not to love about this material?"

Beowulf photos © 2007 Paramount Pictures and Shangri-La Entertainment, LLC

ABOVE: King Hrothgar (Anthony Hopkins) offers Beowulf (Ray Winstone) a reward for his heroism. INSET: Grendel's mother (Angelina Jolie) is the last of her demon kind.

Avary was hooked. He bought every translation of *Beowulf* he could find and read them over and over again for years on end. When he went backpacking in Europe in 1987, he had two goals: to visit the place in Wales where *The Prisoner* was filmed and to see the original pages of *Beowulf* in the British Museum in London. "They were not on display," Avary says. "The curator brought them out to me. I don't know if that would even be possible today. But I begged him. I said, 'Listen, I've come across the sea, and this is the only thing I want to see, and I know they're here.'"

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MOVIE PREVIEW

If you miss the days of *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, and *Chronicles of Narnia*, don't despair. There's plenty of new fantasy movies to choose from this fall.

The Seeking: The Dark Is Rising (scheduled for release on October 5 from Twentieth Century Fox and Walden Media) is based on the second novel in the award-winning *The Dark Is Rising* series by Susan Cooper. Eleven-year-old Will Stanton (played by newcomer Alexander Ludwig) is an ordinary kid with an ordinary family. And yet, Will is the seventh son of a seventh son and learns he's also a "Sign Seeker," destined to save the world.

The world is divided along the lines of light and dark, and Will aligns himself with those who serve the light, known as the Old Ones, a mystical group of chosen warriors who have dedicated their lives to fighting the dark. The power of light has been divided and hidden in the form of six signs of wood, bronze, iron, water, fire, and stone. Will learns that the signs will call to him, but he must step back and forth through time to find them. As Will goes on this journey, he acquires magical powers: he can command fire, move objects, and summon great strength. The trick is, as he gains these powers, he must also learn to trust them.

One of the books in Cooper's series won the Newbery Medal, and the series has been translated into 12 languages and read by over 100 million readers worldwide. Cooper used Arthurian and Celtic myths and legends as influences for the entire series.

At first glance, **Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium** (November 16, also from Twentieth Century Fox and Walden Media) looks like the story of an FAO Schwartz-type toy store influenced by *Night at the Museum* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Mr. Magorium (played by Dustin Hoffman of *Stranger Than Fiction*) runs a toy store, a charming and quaint little shop nestled among a metropolis of skyscrapers. But it's not just any toy store. Every toy is alive, even if most adults don't seem to notice. However, Mr. Magorium's assistant, Molly (Natalie Portman of *V For Vendetta*), cheerfully greets the toys when she opens shop in the morning.

Trouble begins when accountant Henry Weston (Jason Bateman of TV's *Arrested Development*) comes to audit the store. Soon, things begin to go wrong, and Mr. Magorium realizes the toy store is throwing a temper tantrum. Maybe that's because he's decided to retire. That's why Henry is auditing the store: Mr. Magorium is getting ready to give his entire store to Molly. But before that can happen, she'll have to figure out how to calm the store down, which could mean convincing Henry that magic is alive and well in Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium.

Finally, don't miss **Enchanted** (November 21 from Walt Disney Pictures), a movie that begins as classic Disney animation but quickly turns into edgy live-action fantasy.

"It's about an animated girl from a fairy tale world who's

Continued on page 12

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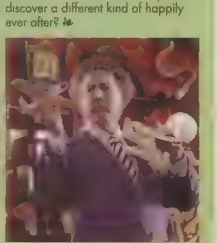
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10

expelled by an evil queen and then emerges as a live-action woman in New York City," says screenwriter Bill Kelly (*Premonition, Blast From the Past*). "That's the place she finds herself banished to. I think it's going to be great. It has traditional 2-D animation, which they don't do much of anymore."

The animated girl is Princess Giselle (Amy Adams of TV's *The Office*), who's happily in love with Prince Edward (James Marsden of *Hairspray*). The problem is, his mother doesn't approve. She's an evil queen (Susan Sarandon of TV's *Children of Dune*) and ultimately succeeds in getting rid of Giselle by pushing her into a deep, dark well. Terrified, the princess falls and falls and falls .. until she finds herself at the other end of the well by pushing open a man-hole cover in the middle of Times Square. Baffled, she immediately seeks aid and is brushed off by hundreds of New Yorkers until she finally gets the attention of Robert (Patrick Dempsey of TV's *Grey's Anatomy*).

"She's a fairy tale character and he's a divorce lawyer," Kelly says about the unlikely couple. "Alan Menken and Stephen Schwartz (*Pocahontas, Hunchback of Notre Dame*) are doing the songs."

Giselle is in a whole new world of chaos, but she's still able to work a bit of her own brand of enchantment to tidy it up a bit. She also finds herself falling in love with Robert. But then Prince Edward pops up in Times Square—sword in hand—to rescue Giselle, soon followed by his mother, the evil queen, who casts a new spell. Robert must find a way to send them back to their fairy-tale land before it's too late. But will he also send Giselle back ... or will she stay and discover a different kind of happily ever after? ❧



You've probably read *Beowulf* in some form and may even have it on your bookshelf. But for anyone who hasn't read it recently, the story goes something like this: in Denmark, King Hrothgar (played by Hopkins in the movie) builds a great mead hall named Heorot, and it becomes a hot spot to party. The monster Grendel (Glover) lives close by and is believed to be one of many monsters descended from Cain—as in Cain and Abel. Grendel considers the constantly partying Danes to be inconsiderate neighbors. So Grendel swings by Heorot at night when the Danes have passed out from a few too many drinks and kills 30 of them. This continues for about 12 years. Across the water, the Geats hear about King Hrothgar's problems, and the warrior Beowulf (Winstone) figures he can take care of the situation. True to his word, Beowulf first defeats Grendel by tearing off the monster's arm, then journeys down to the bottom of a lake to take care of Grendel's mother (Jolie) after she picks up where her son left off. Everybody is happy. Beowulf gets rich, and years later he becomes king himself. In the last part of the poem, an elderly Beowulf fights one last battle when he faces off against a dragon that's pestering his people.

"There were a number of things—let's call them 'sketchy inconsistencies'—in the epic that had always puzzled me," Avary says. "*Beowulf* was spoken word for hundreds of years before it was put to paper by Christian monks. When they wrote it, they added the elements of Christianity. When Grendel is described as the son of Cain, they're saying something very specific: they're saying that Grendel is half-man, half-monster. And it occurred to me that as *Beowulf* had been spoken word for so many years, perhaps a slight amount of 'Telephone Operator' had occurred."

As in the children's game. Remember how it's played? A group of kids get in a circle and start the game when one child whispers a sentence or phrase into the ear of another. The message is passed around the room, one whisper at a time, until the last child says the words out loud—and they usually bear little if any resemblance to the initial phrase.

"A storyteller tends to adopt the material and bring to it that which is dramatic in that time period," Avary says. "It's not too great a leap to believe that from the moment *Beowulf* began, from the first [telling] to when the Christian monks wrote it down, that it transformed somewhat. Maybe boring parts had been left out or maybe things had been amped up to make it more exciting."

Avary explains the sketchy inconsistencies that bothered him. "I'm often analyzing themes of perception vs. reality," Avary says. "The first inconsistency that jumped out to me was Grendel's twisted form of humanity: half-man, half-creature. Grendel's mother is a water demon. She's described quite differently from the way Grendel is described. I found this really curious and it begged the question, who is Grendel's father?

"The other question that kept occurring to me is, Grendel is constantly coming into the mead hall and dragging men away alive. They describe him originally as doing that to eat them alive. That didn't wash with me. They also mention that he never attacks Hrothgar. He's there to torment Hrothgar. It's not too great a leap to think maybe Hrothgar is Grendel's father. With that realization, I then had a couple of other questions. After Beowulf rips off Grendel's arm and is sent to dispatch the mother, he goes into the underwater lair of Grendel's mother. They describe him fighting her for four days, which sounds like a lot of large talk. But maybe it's an underwater cave. What if Beowulf was down there for that long? What happened? We're never really privy as a reader as to what exactly happened in the cave. We're only privy to what Beowulf tells everybody happened.

"And it occurred to me—perhaps Beowulf is not the most reliable and truthful hero. This may cause a revolution among some faithful readers, but just follow me on this. When Beowulf comes out of the cave, he doesn't emerge with the mother's head—he emerges with Grendel's head. Then he says, 'The mother sank into a bog when I killed her.' So there's no proof in my mind that Beowulf had actually killed the mother. This puzzled me for many years."

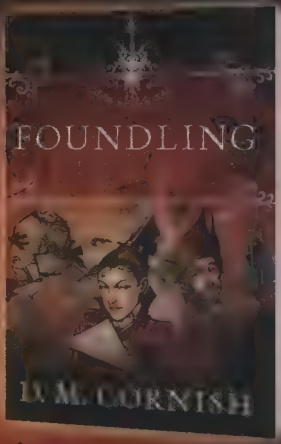
During those years, Avary continued to ponder the *Beowulf* story. In 1997 he'd signed up to translate Gaiman's *Sandman* graphic novel to the screen but had creative differences with the studio, saying, "I didn't want to be the guy to ruin *Sandman*." So Avary walked away from the job, went home, and thought about what to do with the rest of his life. He pulled out his *Beowulf* notes and decided that the time had come to write his own *Beowulf* screenplay, even though he was at a loss for how to connect the beginning of the story about Grendel and his mother with the end of the story about the dragon.

Then Gaiman called. "Neil was happy. I think, that I had left *Sandman*, basically defending his characters," Avary says. "I explained to him all of my theories about *Beowulf*. I said, 'The one problem I'm having is the fractured second half of the epic. The dragon—how does that connect to the whole thing?' And he said, 'Don't you see? Everything you've said—it's so obvious. The dragon is Beowulf's son.'

"I jumped up and said, 'Neil, we have to write this. You've just come up with the Unified Field Theory for *Beowulf*. I've been working on the equation and I've been missing a component of the equation, and you've come up with it. You've figured out the way, based on my research, to tie in the second half to the first half.'"

Here's another aspect of the Unified Field Theory for *Beowulf*. Grendel drags men alive to his mother, supposedly for her to eat later

Monsters and men meet and make war in the land of the Half-Continent



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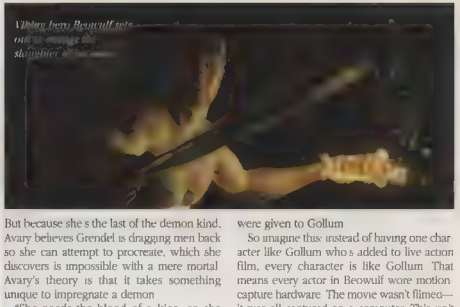

But because she s the last of the demon kind, Avary believes Grendel is dragging men back so she can attempt to procreate, which she discovers is impossible with a mere mortal Avary's theory is that it takes something unique to impregnate a demon

"She needs the blood of a king, so she strikes a deal with Beowulf," Avary says. "All this makes sense to me, because *Beowulf* is one of the core epics that had a reverberating effect through legends. Most of those myths have the father/son legacy, where the sins of the father return in the form of the son to destroy them So when Neil came up with this, I thought, 'My God—this may have actually been the original intention of the story teller!' And so we wrote the script very quickly at that point, and then it took 10 years to get the film made

It s not unusual for a film to take 10 years or more to get made. Roadblocks happen. In this case, even though Avary was disappointed, the 10-year delay turned out to be a blessing in disguise

"I was directing the movie originally," Avary says, who now shares duties with Gaiman as executive producer and screenwriter. "It was a much smaller live-action movie. My plan was to make it in the form of *Jabberwocky*, the Terry Gilliam film And I don't mean in the comic sense—I mean the feeling of mud and dirt, the Dark Ages. Gilliam understands that better than most. [Director Robert] Zemeckis understood my vision of making the movie We weren t able to get the project going, but he always remained passionate He was doing *Castaway* and *What Lies Beneath*, and he was tied up for years making those [and subsequent] movies He called me up one day and said, 'I can't get *Beowulf* out of my head Then he started talking to me about performance capture and the next thing I knew, we were making the movie '

You've probably seen motion-capture performances Andy Serkis did it as Gollum in the *Lord of the Rings* movies and then as King Kong In those films, Serkis wore an array of hardware devices that recorded his movements as he acted while wearing a blue suit (like a bluescreen or greenscreen) so his image could easily replaced So when you see Gollum, you don't see Serkis Instead, you see his movements and facial expressions, which were given to Gollum

So imagine this instead of having one character like Gollum who s added to live action film, every character is like Gollum That means every actor in Beowulf wore motion capture hardware The movie wasn't filmed—it was all captured on a computer. This isn't an entirely new technique. Zemeckis used it a few years ago when he made *The Polar Express*. However, in that case, the goal was to match the paintings in a children's book as closely as possible For *Beowulf*, many of the characters are reported to be so photo-realistic that it's hard to tell that they weren t filmed

"I prefer to think of it as digitally wrapped live action," Avary says about the technology When we first wrote [the *Beowulf* script], computer graphics did not exist. It was not possible to do anything that we're doing now back then When all of that became possible, it became easy to age Beowulf. It became easy to realize the vision in a much deeper and greater way "

He warns that die-hard academics may take offense to certain decisions made for the movie. For example, although *Beowulf* takes place in Denmark, Avary describes that country s landscape as "flat and unimpressive " The movie takes place in a dramatic mountainous region. "Neil said there s some debate as to whether Beowulf even took place in Denmark. There's debate that it possibly took place in the north of England " Also, even though Avary lobbied for historical accuracy, elements like the mead hall Heorot were gussied up for the sake of dramatic effect

One change to which Avary originally objected but then came to appreciate is that instead of returning home, Beowulf stays near Heorot "It sounds like blasphemy to a *Beowulf* academic," Avary says, "but when you see how it ties into the themes and the context of the film itself, I think it actually deepens the myth and is absolutely true to the spirit of the myth The most important thing to do is to remain true to the spirit of the material

"When we finally were making the movie as digitally enhanced live action, we realized we could open up our minds and breathe as much life as possible and serve the source material and at the same time make it a fantastic thrill ride for audiences "

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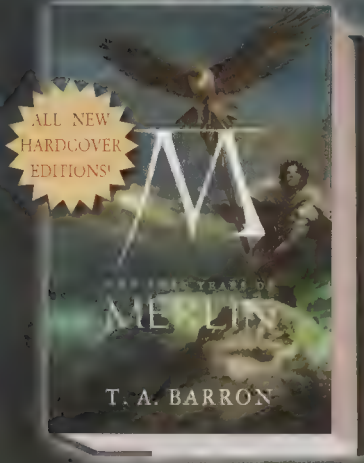

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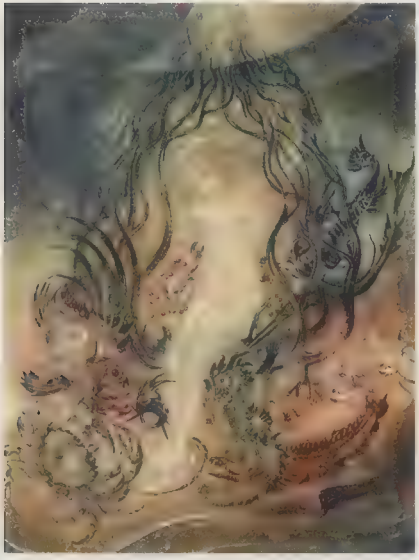
By Virginia Borges

Like Disney's Ariel, Andersen's Little Mermaid sacrifices all for love.

I am a member of the *Little Mermaid* generation of girls. When the Disney movie premiered in 1989, I was smitten, it was the first movie I ever saw in a theater. I loved Ariel, the spunky red-headed heroine, and Sebastian, her singing-crab sidekick. When I went home, I made myself a mermaid's tail from a sheet of butcher paper spangled with sequins and glitter. I was five years old.



ABOVE German illustrator Sulamith Wülfing depicted the Little Mermaid after her tongue is cut out and she receives legs.

It wasn't until many months later that I learned the full story of the Little Mermaid. We had a tattered picture-book copy of the original translation of Hans Christian Andersen's 1837 tale. For some reason, my mother always insisted on reading it aloud to me, rather than encouraging me to read it out loud to her, as she so often would do with other stories. When she read the book to me, it always ended happily: the mermaid gives up her voice to follow her true love and is rewarded for her persistence with marriage. My mother told me a fairy tale of a fairy tale.

Imagine my surprise to discover, upon having the story reread to me by a babysitter, the exquisite variety of tortures Andersen actually inflicted upon his protagonist. Her "little tongue" is cut off as payment to the sea witch, in exchange, she receives legs for which each footfall is like "stepping on piercing needles and sharp knives." "Her tender feet bled so that even her steps were marked," but she merely waits until "all the household were asleep," when "she would go and sit on the broad marble steps, for it eased her burning feet to bathe them in the cold sea water."

After sacrificing all this, we are told that the prince only loves her "the way that one loves a dear sweet child," and it "never occur[s] to him to make her his queen." When the prince falls in love with another, he tells her he expects her to "be happy that I'm so happy, because you love me best of all." In the end, the mermaid has the opportunity to regain her family by killing the prince, but she refuses and chooses instead to lose her life, dissolving into foam. As Maria Tatar observed in her introduction to Andersen's work in *The Classic Fairy Tales. Texts, Criticism*, "Of all Andersen's characters, it is probably the little mermaid who is the real virtuoso in the art of silent suffering."

Andersen perhaps would not disagree: he himself allowed that he was moved by the little mermaid's story even as he was writing it. In an 1837 letter to friend and mentor Severin Ingemann, he admitted that "The Little Mermaid" was "the only one of my works that has affected me while I was writing it. I suffer with my characters, I share their moods, whether good or bad, and I can be nice or nasty according to the scene on which I happen to be working."

During the writing of "The Little Mermaid," Andersen must have suffered greatly indeed. As Tatar notes, much representational energy was spent on dramatizing the mermaid's agony, both physical and emotional. This is perhaps best exemplified in the image of the mermaid, secretly brokenhearted, cel-

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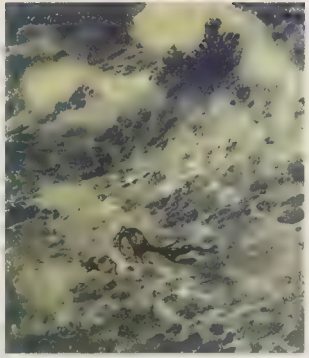
ebrating the marriage of her beloved prince to another woman. During the festivities, she "[w]hirled into dance, gliding like a swallow when it is being pursued.... It was as if sharp knives were cutting her delicate feet, but she did not feel it, the pain that pierced her heart was far worse. She knew that this was the last night that she would see the prince—the one for whom she had left her family and her home, given up her beautiful voice, and suffered endless torment every day without his knowing it. It was the last night that she would breathe the same air as he, that she would see the deep ocean and the starry blue sky. Eternal night, without thoughts or dreams, awaited her, she who didn't have a soul and could not win one. The mermaid laughed and danced, her heart filled with thoughts of death."



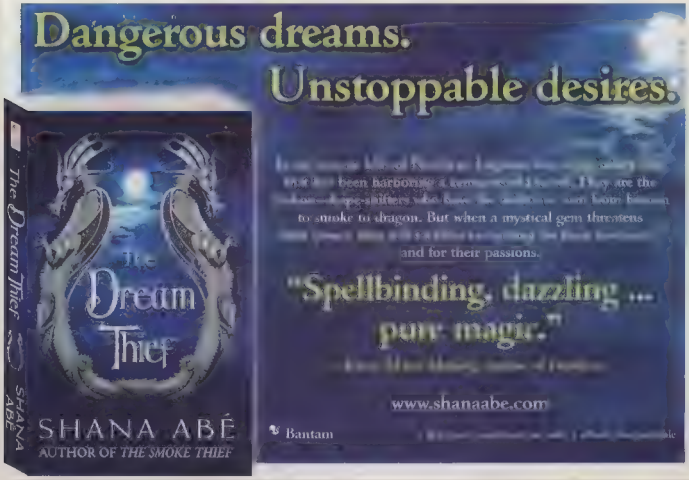
The prince never discovers that the Little Mermaid saved his life, first by preventing him from drowning and then by refusing to kill him to save herself. This colorful and dramatic illustration is by Edmund Dulac.

Not only does the little mermaid suffer, but she must suffer in silence (having given up her voice) and alone (having abandoned her family and home).

The pain showered on the mermaid seems a particularly monstrous kind of anguish. P.L. Travers, in *What the Bee Knows: Reflection on Myth, Symbol and Story* agrees: "How much rather would I see wicked stepmothers boiled in oil—all over in half a second—than bear the protracted agony of the Little Mermaid. There, if you like, is cruelty, sustained, deliberate, contrived. Hans Andersen lets no blood. But his tortures, disguised as piety, are subtle, often demoralizing."

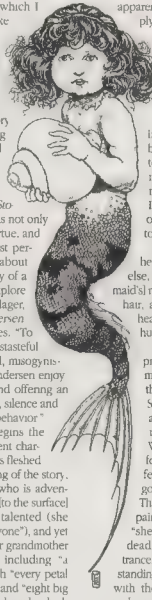
"Disguised as piety," Travers notes, because the mermaid does not yearn only for the prince. The prince is also the means to an end: an immortal soul, which merfolk lack. Although it is her love of the prince that motivates her initially, the idea of obtaining a soul is always present in her mind.

As the story progresses, Andersen's emphasis on the obtainment of a soul comes to the forefront. In his mind, he did the little mermaid a favor: he allowed her the chance to have a soul even though she was rejected by her human love. Andersen was quite proud of this development, telling Ingemann, "I have not, like de la Motte Fouqué in *Undine*, allowed the mermaid's acquiring of an immortal soul to depend upon an alien creature, upon the love of a human being. I'm sure that's wrong! It would depend rather much on chance, wouldn't it? I won't accept that sort of thing in this world. I have permitted my mermaid to follow a more natural, more divine path. No other writer, I believe, has indicated it yet, and that's why I am glad to have it in my tale."



Undine, originally published in Germany in 1811, is the story of a water sprite who can only gain a soul by marrying a human. She falls in love with a knight and marries him, only to later be betrayed. Unlike Undine, Andersen's mermaid is allowed another option; when the mermaid refuses to kill the prince, she dissolves into foam and becomes a "daughter of the air" (Andersen's original working title for "The Little Mermaid"), able to earn a soul through "good deeds .. struggle[ing] for three hundred years to do what good [she] can."

Yet, the winning of a soul does seem to be the booby prize in this equation, after all the mermaid suffers through. As Rosellen Brown writes in "It Is You the Fable Is About" in *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Women Writers Explore Their Favorite Fairy Tales*, "The Little Mermaid" is "a painful story 'redeemed' by another noble ending which I didn't remember because its fake good cheer never registered on me." Andersen may have tried to use the story of 'The Little Mermaid' to express the ideals of Christian faith and redemption, but the emotional (and literary) meat of the story is in the mermaid's yearning for the Prince and the world above."



For, as Jack Zipes emphasizes (in *Hans Christian Andersen: The Misunderstood Storyteller*), "The Little Mermaid" is not only "about Christian obedience, virtue, and salvation. It is, from a feminist perspective, a misogynist tale about dampening the sexual curiosity of a young female who wants to explore other worlds." Jackie Wullschlager, author of *Hans Christian Andersen: The Life of a Storyteller*, agrees. "To modern readers, the tale is distasteful as well as moving, sentimental, misogynistic and moralizing; it shows Andersen enjoying the Mermaid's suffering and offering an oppressive mix of self-sacrifice, silence and expiation as ideals of female behavior."

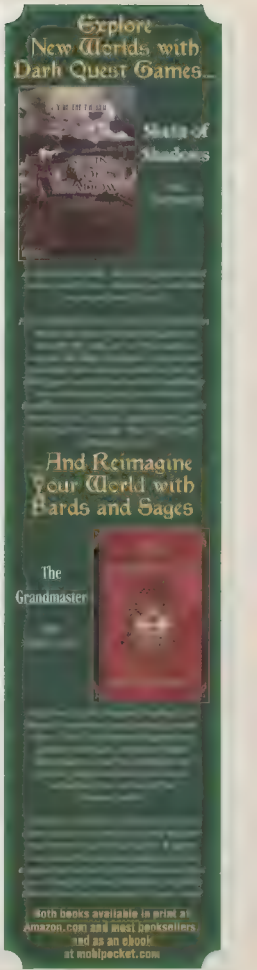
The little mermaid who begins the story is of a completely different character than the one Andersen has fleshed out by the end. In the beginning of the story, the little mermaid is a being who is adventurous ("no one yearned to go [to the surface] as much as the youngest"), talented (she "sang more beautifully than anyone"), and yet sensible and modest (when her grandmother adorns her in ritual finery, including "a wreath of white lilies" in which "every petal in the flower was half a pearl" and "eight big oysters on the princess's tail to show her high rank," the little mermaid wishes she could "shake off all that finery and remove that heavy wreath. The red flowers from her garden would have looked much better on her"). She is brave ("the water rose like great dark mountains.. The little mermaid thought it was fun to go so fast .. The sailors were in danger, she herself had to watch out for timber and pieces of the ship that floated on the water") and bold (after she rescues the prince, she "kissed his beautiful high forehead" while he was still unconscious).

However, the mermaid's character soon devolves as she begins to fixate on the prince. She becomes obsessed, she discovers where he lives and "would often go there in the evening and at night." Night after night, she sat in a canal under the prince's balcony and "gazed at the young prince, who thought that he was all alone in the bright moonlight."

She gives up everything for the prince: her family, her voice, her ability to move without crippling pain. This would not be so troubling if she demanded appreciation for her sacrifice. However, when it becomes apparent that the prince views her simply as a pet, calling her his "little foundling" or "my silent child" and having her "sleep on a velvet cushion outside his door," she simply accepts it. Even when he explicitly confesses to her his love for another, she rationalizes her behavior: "The girl belongs to the holy temple, he told me; she'll never come out into the world. They'll never meet again. I'm here with him—I see him every day. I'll take care of him, love him, devote my life to him."

After all, the prince might feel her he was in love with someone else, but he also "kissed [the mermaid's] red mouth, played with her long hair, and laid his head against her heart, so that she dreamed about human happiness."

Unfortunately, though the prince may have played with the mermaid, he ends up marrying the pure girl from the temple. Sexual overtones such as these abound throughout the text, usually in a negative context. When the mermaid's tail transforms into legs, for example, "it felt like a double-edged sword going through her delicate body." The mermaid cannot manage the pain of this bodily invasion, and so "she fainted and lay there as if dead." Upon awaking from this trance, she awakens to find the prince standing over her—her first experience with the double-edged sword is an unpleasant one. Wullschlager compares this negative view of budding female sexuality with other well-known folktales: "Like 'Sleeping Beauty,' 'Snow White,' and 'Rapunzel,' it is a coming-of age fairy tale in which a young girl at fifteen or sixteen is suddenly



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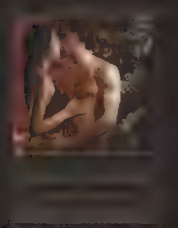

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forced to cope with her own sexuality and the responses her beauty arouses. Like 'Sleeping Beauty,' it has images of blood which may symbolize the onset of menstruation, and it is imbued with an adolescent fear of sex which the 52-year-old Andersen shared."

Andersen himself publicly courted two women with no success, but privately, Wullschlager argues, he was infatuated with his dear friend Edvard, who married his sweetheart shortly before Andersen finished the story.

To Wullschlager, the hopeless love of the mermaid for the prince is a reflection of Andersen's own hopeless love for his best friend. In giving the mermaid salvation beyond the prince, Andersen hopes to be able to receive his own salvation beyond Edvard. The mermaid hopes to be saved by God; Andersen by his art. For both, however, the goal is immortality.

According to Andersen, it seems that the correct answer for the little mermaid is not to pursue sex at all; rather, as in some sort of Madonna complex, she is to become a pure "daughter of the air," clean and light as foam, and no longer bound by the physical and emotional pain she endured during her pursuit of sexual pleasure and romance on earth. Indeed, this outcome can be seen as a kind of reward for her "good behavior," as defined by Zipes: "It is important to recall that the prince never learns that it was the mermaid who saved him. Nor does he fall in love with her. He is struck by her devotion, and it is her devotion to him that entails self-sacrifice and brings about her own miraculous salvation ... Voiceless and tortured, the mermaid serves a prince who never fully appreciates her worth. Twice she saves his life. The second time is the most significant, instead of killing him to regain her identity and rejoin her sisters and grandmother, the mermaid forfeits her own life and becomes an ethereal figure blessed by God."

There are few other options for females in Andersen's story besides this holy chastity. If a girl is not the lucky chosen one, as in the prince's handpicked temple bride, then none of the options are really attractive.

The only fully fleshed out counterpoint to the mermaid's fate is that of the sea witch, grotesque sexuality incarnate. Literally a man-eater, she sits in "a house built out of the white bones of shipwrecked men." Her two fat water snakes, which she calls "her little chickens," "frolic on her huge spongy chest", she lets a toad "eat out of her mouth the way that people let a little canary eat a lump of sugar."

The only other plausible female alternative seems to be the mermaid's grandmother. An ancient being obsessed with status, she was so "proud of her noble lineage, she wore twelve oysters on her tail. (Other nobles could have only six)." When the little mermaid complains of the ache of wearing the oysters, the grandmother simply notes "there's no beauty without pain."

The Little Mermaid sees her prince for the last time in this illustration by W. Heath Robinson. Her pain is evident as she hides her face in her arms.

When rejected, then, the little mermaid is seemingly left with no other choice but to kill herself; her worth was invested only into this single human man, and she does not want to become either like the sea witch or her grandmother. Zipes argues, "The mermaid must learn her proper place in the order of things, and it is apparently improper for her to pursue a young man, to express her sexual drives, and to change her social position... Once she turns human, she enters a world totally dominated by male desire and has no choice but to commit suicide. She realizes that she will never fit into a world that does not accept her devotion, and murdering the prince will not bring her any satisfaction."

This theme of female suicide in fairy tales has also been explored at length in Anne Sexton's fairy tale-inspired poetry collection, *Transformations*, a very worthwhile read.

Andersen's Little Mermaid as originally envisioned makes the Disney version seem positively innocuous. My mother certainly did not object to Ariel and Flounder in the way she did to Andersen's original, at the very least, it did not drive her to household censorship. As Zipes notes, "Ariel is a spunky heroine, who speaks and acts like a good, white middle-class heroine of the 1980s. It is true that she sacrifices her voice and fins for the love of a man, but it should be noted that this gesture can be read as an acceptance of the other,' an overcoming of xenophobia, a celebration of her curiosity. Though she marries a prince who has a similar background to hers, Eric is not a member of the merfolk and Ariel goes against her father's wishes when she pursues him. In other words, we have a mixed marriage in the end, an acceptance of the other."

However, he tweaks this view a few pages later: "Ariel's temporary nonconformist behavior was basically a selling point in the Disney film, her rebellion was never to be taken seriously because she was destined from the beginning to wed the perfect partner and form a charming couple."

In fact, despite the movie's initial "girl power" image, with Ariel not being afraid to defy her father and pursue her dream, the message underneath is anything but feminist. An alternate way of viewing the story, Zipes argues, is as, "A coming of age story about a feisty 'American' mermaid, who pouts and pushes until she gets her way: she is the charming, adorable, spoiled and talented princess, Daddy's pet, who demonstrates that she deserves to move up into the real world by dint of her perseverance and silence. Ariel must learn to channel her sexual desires and suffer for a man before she can win him as a prize... Ariel's curiosity and desire to be part of another world almost causes her death as well as her father's; the prince saves Ariel by piercing the witch with the phallic bow of his ship; thanks to him Ariel is retransformed from mermaid into a beautiful bride."

In this way, the Disney movie puts Ariel into a restrictive compartment just as much as Andersen does, except, while Andersen's is one of chastity, the Disney movie box is one of encouraged premature sexuality.

That, at least, is what Chris Richards argues in "Room to Dance: Girls' Play and the Little Mermaid" in *In Front of the Children: Screen Entertainment and Young Audiences*. "Ariel ... can be understood as a fantasy sexual self for young girls, a figure through which the relation between the self as experienced in the present, with the body of a small child, to the self as imagined and projected into the future, with the sexual body of a woman, can be played at, perhaps rehearsed, perhaps learned."

This reminds me uncomfortably of my own butcher-paper mermaid tail, which I used to enlist several other girls in my kindergarten class for our talent show. They each made

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their own tails (along with I am ashamed to say, faux seashell bikini tops) and we danced to the movie's music together, in front of our class and the rest of the grade.

It's exactly that uncomfortable feeling, the one brought on by the thought of five-year-olds in paper seashell bras at which Richards takes aim: "The presentation of narratives ... which dramatize growth into sexual maturity engages children's uncertainty about their own futures — what are they to become and how are they to live — through the transformation from child into adult? Such future-oriented fantasies are fraught with tensions between dependence and autonomy, engaging the gulf between childhood subordination and the apparent power of adults. Ursula, a character exciting ambivalent fascination, takes Ariel into the dilemma.

Ariel: If I become human I'll never be with my father or sisters again.

Ursula: That's right—but you'll have your man—life's full of tough choices, isn't it?

Should a five-year-old be thinking about these choices?

Maria Tatar agrees with Richards' somewhat unsettling assessment of the Disney movie: "Ariel may regain her voice when she is assimilated to the human world in the end, but Disney conveniently leaves us in the dark about the cost, allowing the couple's final embrace to erase Ariel's rebelliousness, her troubled relationship with the feminine, and the painful self-mutilation involved in her transformation."

At least Andersen's envisioning of the story is honest; he openly values the mermaid's soul above what she has to offer sexually. The Disney version can be seen as more insidious, in that its pitfalls toward its young female audience are gussied in bright colors and Caribbean beats.

"The Little Mermaid" is perhaps most dangerous, whether in the Disney version or Andersen's original, because it so neatly describes what so many young girls want. As the little mermaid's grandmother tells her when she asks how she can receive a soul, "Only if a human being loved you so much that you meant more to him than his father or mother—and only if all his thoughts and feelings were devoted to you and he let the pastor put his right hand in yours with the promise of faithfulness now and for all eternity. Then his soul would flow into your body, and you too could share human happiness. He would give you a soul and still keep his own."

I am not ashamed to admit that this is still what I want today, politically correct or no. Perhaps the greatest risk is that a million little girls, a million mermaids with butcher paper tails, may think they have to give up their voices, literally or symbolically, to obtain that state.

FURTHER READING

FICTION

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- "Pangs of Love" by Jane Gardam (*Close Company: Tales of Mothers and Daughters*, Park & Heaton eds., Hamilton Hamish, 1990).
- *Aquamarine* by Alice Hoffman (Scholastic, 2001).
- *The Mermaid Summer* by Mollie Hunter (Harper Trophy, 1990).
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- *Mermaids: Sirens of the Sea* by Kerry Colburn (Running Press, 2003).
- *The Classic Fairy Tales: Text, Criticism* by Maria Tatar (Norton, 1999).
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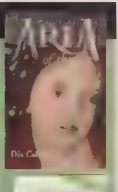
ONLINE

- "The Annotated Little Mermaid" on the Surlalune Fairy Tales website www.surlalunefairytales.com/littlemermaid/index.html

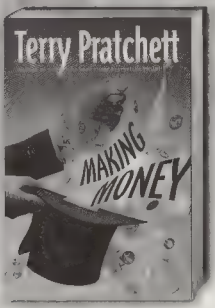


Eos Books—*The Next Chapter*

Making Money

Terry Pratchett

HarperCollins



"Full of nimble wordplay, devious plotting, and outrageous situations, but always grounded in an astute understanding of human nature... [Pratchett's] books are almost always better than they have to be."

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

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David Forbes

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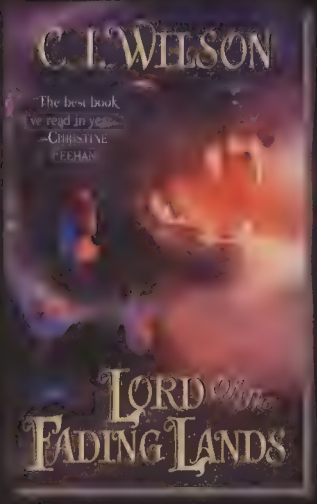
TAKE A JOURNEY TO THE
IN DEBUT AUTHOR C. L.



Once he was free and powerful.
Once he was cursed and
tormented with vengeance.

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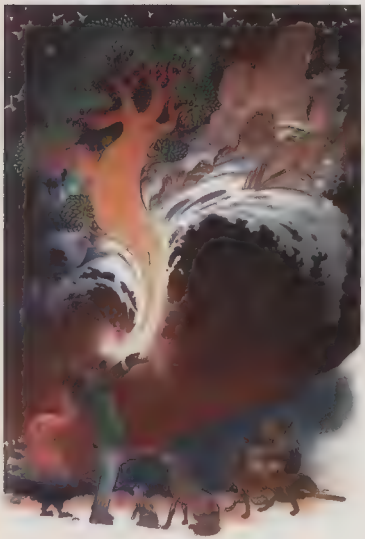
[redacted] truemates, not of the body, mind or soul. For ahead an epic battle was fast approaching, and only united could they hope to turn back the armies of darkness.

[redacted]

By Paul Witcover & Jeff VanderMeer

K.J. Parker creates an intricate fantasy world without casting a single spell.

Does a good fantasy require magic? Other than the literary kind, absolutely not. K.J. Parker's ***Devices and Desires*** (Orbit, New York, trade paperback, 672 pp., $12.99, ISBN: 978-0-316-00338-4), the first volume of the *Engineer Trilogy*, is an audacious, utterly captivating novel that, like the great Gormenghast books of Mervyn Peake, eschews magic in the creation and elaboration of an intricately detailed fantasy world. Parker is an American-born writer who lives in England and writes under a pseudonym; she is also the author of the *Fencer* and *Scavenger Trilogies*, both of which are now going right to the top of my reading list.



Charles Vess created the perfect illustration for the cover of The Coyote Road: *an anthology of trickster tales edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling.*

Devices and Desires is about the clash of cultures, of technologies, of systems of manufacture, trade, and thought. It's also about love and duty and betrayal. Part comedy of manners, part revenge tragedy, it's one of the most entertaining novels I've read this year.

The Perpetual Republic of Mezentia is ruled by a consortium of guilds: the Foundrymen's and Machinists' Guild, the Tailors and Clothiers' Guild, and so on. The guilds intrigue against each other for advantage, but while individual guilds rise and fall, the authority of the guild system itself remains sacrosanct. Mezentia owes its wealth and privileged position among nations to its comparatively advanced technology (approximately equivalent to that of 18th-century England, while the rest of the world seems stuck at best in the Renaissance), and it guards its secrets jealously. The slightest departure from the official specifications for manufactured objects, whether suits of clothes or suits of armor, is punished severely. Innovation is a crime.

Ziani Vaatzes, a foreman at a weapons factory, is arrested, tried, and convicted for building, in the privacy of his home, a toy for his young daughter that flouts specifications by hundredths of an inch. Sentenced to death as an Abominator, Vaatzes escapes the country and makes his way toward the mountains. Vaatzes does not disagree with the sentence passed against him, he simply loves his wife and daughter so much that he cannot bear to be deprived of them. Since he can never return to Mezentia, he must, or so he reasons with the cold logic of his profession, destroy his own country if he wishes to see them again.

Vaatzes finds refuge in the Duchy of Eremia, a mountainous country whose army has just been all but destroyed in a foolish attack against Mezentia. Mezentia's mercenary army, equipped with scorpions, a catapult-type weapon capable of flinging hundreds of sharp metal spikes with distance and accuracy, did not even have to engage directly with the outclassed Eremians. Now Vaatzes promises Duke Orsea, the affably ineffective ruler of Eremia, that he will teach his people to fight the Mezentian way. When Mezentia dispatches a new army to the Eremian capital Civitas Eremiae (the highest best-fortified city in the world), the duke has little choice but to accept, despite the suspicions of his best friend and adviser, Miel Ducas, who worries that adoption of Mezentian weapons will destroy the Eremian way of life, which is based on such quaint concepts as duty and honor.

Ducas loves his Duke but does not respect him, and indeed the vacillating Orsea lacks almost every leadership quality. Unfortunately, Ducas also loves Orsea's wife, Veatriz, which complicates matters somewhat. A further complication lies in the fact that Duke Valens, whose country has only recently

It's like one of those commemorative plates.

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So play away and make this battle your own. And when you're [illegible] you can put it on your shelf and admire it for the next 20 years.

ended a centuries' old war with Eremia, is also in love with Veatriz, whom he knew in his boyhood, and is conducting a clandestine correspondence with her that, if it should ever come to light, might very well end the peace between the two traditional enemies. Valens is everything Orsea is not: decisive, firm, a born leader

With these raw materials, and his own intellect and monomania, Vaatzes sets out to build a machine like no other—a machine whose parts will be men and women, armies, entire nations. One watches his grandiose plans take shape with a mixture of admiration and horror, for Vaaztes, in pursuing what he most desires, leaves his humanity behind. And like many people obsessed with a singular goal, his shrewdness in judging the motivations of others, and twisting those motives to his own ends, is matched, if not exceeded, by self-blindness. Indeed, his gaze is likely fixed outward so unalterably in order to avoid having to look closer to home, where unpleasant truths lurk ... truths that may be invisible to him but not to sharp-eyed readers

Parker's prose glitters with intelligence, wit, and precision. One suspects that she would have made a formidable engineer herself.

Of course, a little magic doesn't hurt a fantasy, either ... Last issue, I recommended David Anthony Durham's *Acacia* as a superb example of an epic fantasy that treats magic with the respect it deserves. In ***Winterbirth*** (Orbit, New York, trade paperback, 576 pp. $14.99, ISBN: 978-0-316-06769-0), the opening installment of the *Godless Trilogy*, first-time author Brian Ruckley has produced a novel nearly as fine.

In Ruckley's cosmogenesis, the gods created five races: Whreinn, Saolin, Huanin, Kyrinn, and Anain. The Whreinin were werecreatures whose cruelties resulted in their eradication at the hands of the Huanin (humans) and Kyrinn (imagine a cross between Tolkien's wood elves and Native American tribal peoples). This genocide was so repellent to the gods that they turned their backs on their creations and departed "to places beyond the thoughts or imaginings of any save their own kind."

The Huanin and Kyrinin, now known as the Tainted Races, were for a time allies, even interbreeding to produce sterile offspring called na'kyrim, some of whom, the woken, gained access to an underlying reality known as the Shared, from which they derived extraordinary magical abilities. When war broke out between Huanin and Kyrinin, the woken fought on both sides and played a big part in the destruction that followed, after the victory of the Huanin, the Kyrinin were much reduced in numbers and power, and the na'kyrim too lost much of their influence and their potency in the Shared.

Some time later, a new religion arose among the Huanin: the Black Road, a faith holding that all human lives follow a predetermined path whose ultimate goal is the return of the gods, who will destroy the world and then remake it, reincarnating only those faithful to the precepts of the Black Road. In *Winterbirth*, war erupts between Huanin believers and nonbelievers and threatens to spread to the Kyrinin . and perhaps the other surviving races as well

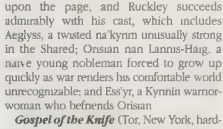
The most elaborate world building is for naught without characters to bring it to life upon the page, and Ruckley succeeds admirably with his cast, which includes Aeglyss, a twisted na'kyrim unusually strong in the Shared; Orsian nan Lannis-Haig, a naïve young nobleman forced to grow up quickly as war renders his comfortable world unrecognizable; and Ess'yr, a Kyrinin warrior-woman who befriends Orsian

Gospel of the Knife (Tor, New York, hardcover, 320 pp. $25.95, ISBN 978-0-312-86631-0) is a sequel of sorts to Will Shetterly's 1997 urban fantasy, *Dogland*, which told of the adventures of the Nix family, and especially four year old Chris, in late 1950s-early 1960s Florida. Now it's 1969, and 14-year-old Chris is an aspiring foot soldier in the countercultural revolution, though well acquainted with rock 'n' roll and drugs, he is as yet uninitiated into the mysteries of sex. After meeting a vivacious black teenage girl named CC, that longed for initiation occurs . but sex is the least of the mysteries in which Chris finds himself suddenly entangled. While the fraught relationship that develops between Chris and CC allows Shetterly to focus, as he did in *Dogland*, on racism and sexual and religious hypocrisy in the South, *Gospel* is more than just shooting rednecks in a cracker barrel. Shetterly's aim is wider, on religion itself, which he savagely deconstructs, turning it into a Zelaznyesque shell game, with ammunition drawn from the recent publication of the Gospel of Judas as well as other Christian apocrypha and Gnostic texts

A rich man, Jay Dumont, becomes Chris's benefactor, bankrolling his admission to an exclusive private school where tomorrow's political and business leaders are produced. Dumont reveals that Chris is a nephilim, a kind of human—or perhaps god—endowed with remarkable abilities: the very abilities ascribed to Jesus and the God of the Old Testament, in fact. Actually, Chris, like Dumont himself, is a superior kind of nephilim, worshipped by the others: an eloha. There are four elohim: a king, a queen, a princess, and a prince. Dumont, his wife, and his daughter Heller, fill the first three roles. Chris, as prince, is expected to marry Heller and in the fullness of time succeed Dumont as king, or El Elyon.

Much of the novel takes place in the school, known as the Academy, which perhaps inevitably but wholly unfortunately comes to resemble Hogwarts, with Chris in the unenviable role of Harry Potter. These overly familiar aspects of the novel detract from its punch as does Shetterly's regrettable decision to write the novel in the second person. Still, Chris's coming of age is handled with subtlety and depth, as is his fight to remain true to himself, and to CC, amidst all the blandishments of worship and power that fall to him as the chosen one. By the end of the novel *The Gospel of the Knife* seems like both an attack on religion and an attempt to salvage something meaningful from its ruins

Emma Bull's rich new novel ***Territory*** (Tor, New York, hardcover, 320 pp. $24.95, ISBN: 978-0-812-85735-6) is subtitled "A Unique Retelling of an American Legend," but it's not quite that, although set in Tombstone, Arizona, in 1881 and featuring a cast of characters that includes Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, Ike Clanton, John Ringo, and others equally familiar from history books and Hollywood



Wayne Barlowe is more than familiar with the landscapes and denizens of Hell, beginning in 1999 with the publication of *Barlowe's Inferno*. He took a second journey in 2001 with *Brushfire: Illuminations from the Inferno*. Barlowe has now applied his expertise to crafting his first novel, *God's Demon*, to be published in October by Tor. Fans of his paintings will not be disappointed as Barlowe is equally adept at painting his dark concept of the underworld with words. Don't miss this issue's Gallery of Barlowe's Hell paintings and an insightful interview about his work and his new novel.

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NEW YOUNG ADULT FANTASY BOOKS

BY MICHAEL JONES

Wicked Lovely, by Melissa Marr, HarperTeen, June 2007. Aislinn's always been able to see the magical creatures of Faerie as they walk among us, unseen and unsuspected. So far, she's been obsessively careful about not drawing their attention. Unfortunately, when Keenan, the Summer King, decides that Aislinn might be the perfect woman to take up the mantle of Summer Queen and end his centuries-old curse, it kicks into high gear an ancient game played by his mother, the Winter Queen. As Aislinn is dragged, kicking and screaming, into the world of the Fae and their seductive magics, she'll be forced to use every resource at her disposal and his own strengths to put things right before he pays a heavy price. *Vintage* is a powerful, haunting story, very atmospheric and spooky. The characterizations are crisp and believable, the interactions are real, and the main characters are fun to watch as they maneuver through life, love, and the occult. Berman's got a great voice, and he weaves a splendid ghost story/gay coming-of-age tale.

The Silver Moon Elm, by MaryJanice Davidson and Anthony Alongi, Berkley Jam, June 2007. Jennifer Scales is still struggling with her unique nature: half-weredragon, half-beaststalker, able to bridge numerous worlds, potentially able to bring multiple warring races together, if they'll only listen to her. Unfortunately, things just keep getting more complicated, especially when a small disgruntled group of her enemies weaves a spell that rewrites the world. Now Jennifer is stuck in a world where weredragons are near-extinct, and their mortal enemies, the wereachnids rule openly. Everyone she knows is dead, or vastly different, and her allies are questionable at best. Even if Jennifer finds a way to return the world to normal, will she survive? This series just keeps getting better with each book, though portions near the end of this one were a little convoluted and hard to follow on a first reading. Nevertheless, it's fun, with a fresh new premise, memorable characters, and a feisty heroine.

Interworld, by Neil Gaiman and Michael Reeves, Eos, June 2007. Joey Harker always thought he had bad direction sense. However, when he takes a wrong turn and ends up in another dimension altogether, he soon discovers that he's capable of walking between alternate worlds, and finding home may be impossible. Soon, he's caught up in a war between science and magic, a conflict raging across an infinite variety of alternate Earths, and his only hope lies in allying with a very peculiar organization that fights against both sides. And this is just the start of a wild, wonderful, epic adventure that bounces with glee from one reality to the next. Gaiman and Reeves originally conceived this story for television, but it's translated to book form quite nicely. *Interworld*'s a great deal of fun, building on some brilliant concepts, and I'm hoping we'll see more along these lines soon.

Alex Unlimited: The Vosarak Code, by Dan Jolley, Tokyopop, May 2007. Alexandra Benno's unique gift to sift through infinite probabilities and summon specialized, idealized doppelgangers from other dimensions has made her indispensable as a secret agent. The problem? Her alternate selves get all the credit, leaving her feeling jealous and put-out. However, her big break finally comes when she's allowed out on field work, along with one of her alternates. But a routine mission soon turns into something dangerous, testing Alex's limits. The start of a new original series, this book features an intriguing concept and a fun execution, both touching and a little bittersweet. This book did an excellent job of evoking traditional fairy tales while creating something new and interesting.

Vintage, by Steve Berman, Haworth Press, March 2007. When a young man meets the ghost of a long-dead teen along an empty stretch of road, it pulls him into a decades-old mystery. What seems at first to be a gay love story stretched across the years soon turns sinister and deadly, and the hero has to draw upon his friends to survive and come out on top. Unfortunately for Keenan, Aislinn's unlike any girl he's ever romanced, and she's about to leave her own mark on Faerie. This is an edgy, modern take on classic fairy tales, with a stubborn, feisty heroine and an intriguing cast to back her up. Marr doesn't go the expected route, either, throwing in plenty of twists and turns right up until the very end, delivering a satisfying story with an ending that isn't quite "happily ever after." This is a strong debut for the author, and I'll be looking forward to more from her.

The Princess and the Hound, by Mette Ivie Harrison, Eos, May 2007. Prince George can speak with animals, possessing a magic that would get him killed if anyone knew about it. Princess Beatrice possesses a unique bond with her faithful hound, Marit, who never leaves her side. They barely know one another, but for the good of their respective kingdoms, they'll have to marry. But first, they have to learn to trust, and understand, each other. Will their combined magic be enough to save the day and solve the problems plaguing their lands? This is a highly unusual love story, filled with twists and surprises. I loved watching George and Beatrice (and Marit) interact as they tried to get to know one another, and the resolution was both satisfying and unexpected. I'll be looking forward to future installments.

The Secret Life of Sparrow Delaney, by Suzanne Harper, Greenwillow, July 2007. The seventh daughter of a seventh daughter in a family known for its psychic abilities, all Sparrow Delaney wants to be is normal, a hard task when she can see, hear, and talk to ghosts, all of whom want her help. When she starts tenth grade in a school where no one knows her, she thinks it's her chance to blend in. Unfortunately, a very persistent ghost has plans to make her face up to her powers and responsibilities. But will it ruin her newfound friendships? This is a charming, entertaining story about growing up and embracing one's special talents, filled with quirky, unforgettable characters.

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movies, Bull's novel takes place in the weeks before the shootout at the OK Corral. Nor does she limit herself to historical personages but introduces a number of fictional creations, notably two of her three main characters, Jesse Fox, a "horse whisperer," and Mildred Benjamin, a young widow who works as a typesetter at the *Nugget*, the local paper. Rounding out the trio of main characters is Doc Holliday.

Fox is a sorcerer, albeit a reluctant one, in denial about his abilities and the responsibilities that accompany them; he is dangerous not only because of what he can do but because of his willful ignorance concerning things magical, which makes him a target for sorcerers better versed in these matters than he. Wyatt Earp is one such man.

Fox, on his way to Mexico, has no intention of stopping in Tombstone, but circumstances compel him to do so. Once there, his mere presence interferes with the schemes of Earp, a sociopath who is using his formidable magical powers to carve out an empire of wealth and influence for himself and his family.

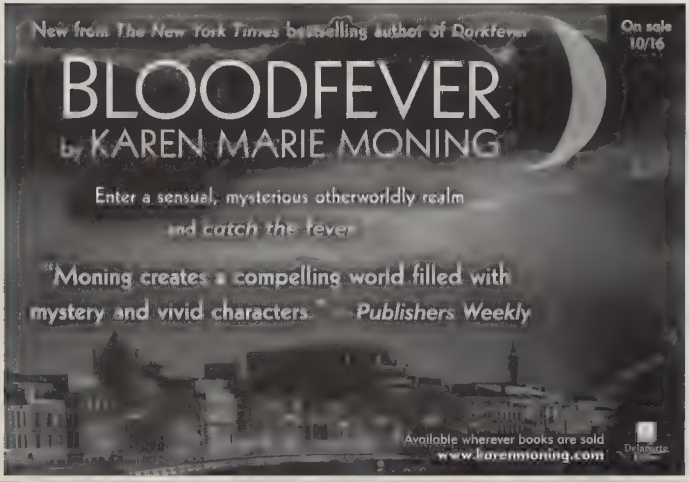
While Fox struggles to accept who and what he is, under the tutelage of Chow Lung, a Chinese physician with sorcerous abilities of his own, he falls in love with Mildred, who is experiencing difficulties carving out a place for herself as a creative writer and reporter in the patriarchal confines of the Old West. Bull's depiction of these two lonely, decent, highly intelligent people is one of the delights of the novel, their dialogue vibrates with repressed passion and playful wit, with a hopeful longing barely tempered by the losses they have sustained in their lives.

But Bull's real triumph is Doc Holliday, whose droll, acerbic voice she captures with such apparent fidelity as to seem a work of magic itself. Her Holliday is a cynic afflicted with intelligence and compassion, a burned-out case kept going by his love for the sometime prostitute Big Nose Kate . . and by mystical energies channeled his way by Earp. It's love, in fact, that keeps Holliday in Earp's debt, physically and metaphysically, this love is a corruptive force, a dark counterpoint to that which gives Fox and Mildred the strength they need to face up to their fears.

Rather than an alternate history, I would call this a secret history, an unveiling of what lies behind the façade of the world we know . or think we know. This is Tim Powers' territory, but Bull makes it her own.

The best horror stories are also secret histories and some of the most interesting, intelligent, and genuinely disturbing horror being written today flows from the pen of Laird Barron. His first collection, ***The Imago Sequence*** (Night Shade Books, San Francisco, hardcover, 242 pp., $24.95, ISBN: 978-1-59780-088-4) bringing together nine previously published works, including the memorable title story, a World Fantasy Award nominee, is the most impressive I've seen since Joe Hill's *20th Century Ghosts*, and it's actually a more sustained performance. There are no clunkers here.

Barron's style can be challenging at times, as in "Bulldozer," a remarkable tale of demonic corruption told from the point of view of a Pinkerton agent on the trail of a cannibalistic killer. The story begins in medias res, with a stream of consciousness wail that knocks readers off balance; this is normally a bad thing at the outset of a story, but Barron makes it work. Instead of being pushed out of the piece, we're tumbled into it like Alice down the rabbit hole—only it ain't Wonderland where we end up, no indeed, but in what might be some outer circle of hell. Chow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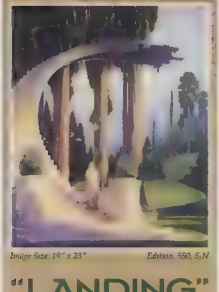

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ever much it resembles "just another wild and wooly California mining town" at the tail end of the Gold Rush), harrowingly close to a hero who may have bitten off more than he can chew . . or perhaps it's the other way around. Anyway, as the story develops, the idea of holes and what may fall into them, and come out of them, becomes of central importance and gradually the realization dawns that Barron has engineered a seamless marriage of style and substance: no mean achievement even if it is something of a shotgun wedding.

Barron's stories, with their protagonists who are failures and losers or well on the way to becoming so, men of a certain age or experience who have avoided or abdicated their traditional responsibilities in our culture yet are not without an idiosyncratic sense of honor, read like weird hybrids of Raymond Carver and Raymond Chandler . . with healthy dollops of Lovecraft and Poe thrown in. His dialogue is both laconic and snappy, full of a kind of world-weary wisdom that goes down like shots of aged, peaty whisky. And, as with the fiction of Lucius Shepard, you get a sense that here is a writer who has lived what he is writing. Which, considering his subject matter, is a bit alarming.

The Nietzschean conceit of the abyss is key to Barron's work, and it's a theme he explores from its profane depths to its philosophical heights, always with shudder-inducing results. As a character in "The Imago Sequence" expresses it: "Enlightenment is its own reward, its own punishment. You begin to see so much more. And so much more sees you."

Finally, from Sean Wallace and Paul Tremblay, editors of the quarterly *Fantasy Magazine*, comes ***Fantasy*** (Prime Books, paperback, 160 pp, $6.95, ISBN 978-0-8095-5699-1), a slim anthology of 11 previously unpublished works intended to showcase the sort of fiction published in the magazine. The writers represented are far from household names, yet more than one has published fiction in the pages of *Realms*, which is as good a recommendation as I can give. Among my favorites: "All the Growing Time," by Becca De La Rosa, a fairy tale–like love story whose arch tone and sophistication reminded me of Michael Moorcock's *Dancers at the End of Time* series. "Shallot," by Samantha Henderson, which gives a surprisingly poignant science-fictional twist to an Arthurian legend, and "Brother of the Moon," by the always excellent Holly Phillips, a beautiful yet quietly brutal exploration of sibling rivalry and love.

Paul Witcover

Mister Pip, Lloyd Jones, Dial Press (Bantam Dell), New York, hardcover, 224 pp., $20.00, ISBN 978-0-385-34106-6

Winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize Best Book Award for 2007, *Mister Pip* may slip under the radar of many genre readers. This would be a shame, because *Mister Pip* is a harrowing, inspiring, and beautifully written

She can melt steel – and men's hearts.
By day, Fiona Fine is a successful couture
catering to the high society players of
New York. By night, she's Fiona, a superhero
supplying who can create and manipulate fire with
her bare hands. Fiona, along with the other members
of the
who want to
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Author of Karma Girl
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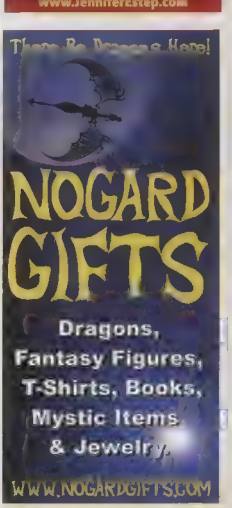


GRAPHIC NOVEL REVIEWS

Scarlet Traces: The Great Game, Ian Edginton and D'Israeli, Dark Horse Books, Milwaukie, OR, hardcover, 104 pp., $14.95, ISBN: 978-1-59307-717-4. A superior example of "alternate-alternate history" fantasy, the brilliant *Scarlet Traces* riffs off of H G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* by supposing that Great Britain has adapted Martian technology in the wake of the aliens' defeat. In this installment, the Brits have been waging war on Mars for decades while hiding a terrible secret from their citizens. Intrepid photojournalist Charlotte Hemming travels to Mars, only to find that the British military are preparing a cataclysmic solution to end the war. A dynamic, bright color scheme and eccentric approaches to portraying Martian technology nicely complement the exciting storyline.

Artesia Afield/Afire, Mark Smylie, Archaia Studios Press, Fort Lee, NJ, hardcovers, 181/240 pp., $24.95, ISBNs. 978-1-932386-27-1, 978-1-932386-33-2. With the scope of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* but from a distinctly female perspective, *Artesia Afield* and *Artesia Afire* chronicle the exploits of the eponymous heroine Accompanied by spirit guides, betrayed by kings and generals at every turn, Artesia tries to fight honorably against the Thessids, even as the spirit world places its own demands on her life and companions. "Epic" doesn't even begin to describe the nuances and complexities of the plots and alliances in this fresh take on highly recommended heroic fantasy.

B.P.R.D.: The Universal Machine, Mike Mignola, John Arcudi, Guy Davis, Dark Horse Books, Milwaukie, OR, trade paperback, 134 pp., $17.95, ISBN: 978-1-59307-710-5. This sequel to last year's *The Black Flame* (in which whole cities were destroyed by a Lovecraft an monster) finds the Bureau for Paranormal Research and Defense trying to find a cure for the "death" of their homunculus, Roger. That path leads Dr. Kate Corrigan to some rather shady parts of France, including the magically re-created castle of a long-dead marquis who isn't as inanimate as one would hope. Cabinets of curiosities and horrors play a large role in Dr. Corriga's genuinely suspenseful adventures, all rendered in the blocky yet evocative style developed by Mignola.

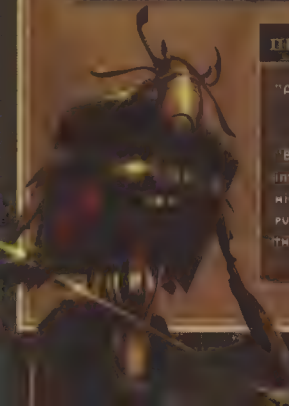
Robotika, Alex Sheikman, Archaia Studios Press, Fort Lee, NJ, hardcover, 128 pp , $19.95, ISBN: 978-1-932386-21-9. Sleek, ultra-violent color defines this fantasy set in the future. Imperfect cyborgs square off against imperfect humans in elaborate and hyper-real duels. A distinctly Asian aesthetic permeates the panels, with generous use of space deliberately contradicting the usual clutter of action scenes in comics. The "future" cities are depicted as fancifully as anything in *Alice in Wonderland*. Anyone attempting to read *Robotika* as science fiction will be disappointed. Fantasy lovers, however, will glut themselves on the visuals.

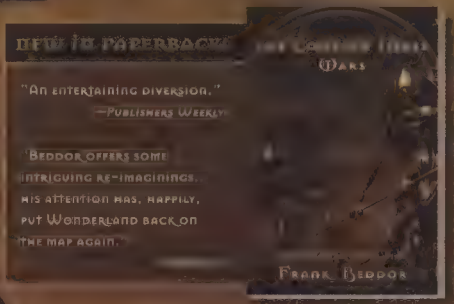
Hell Beasts: How to Draw Grotesque Fantasy Creatures, Jim Pavelec, Impact Books, Cincinnati, OH, oversized trade paperback, 128 pp , $19.95, 978-1-58180-926-8 Ever wondered how some of the artists in *Realms of Fantasy* learned to create those beautiful, deadly, amazing beasts? Then Jim Pavelec has written a book for you. *Hell Beasts* is a detailed, careful teaching tool that includes information on tools, setup, references, and anatomy. "Winged Beasts" and "Reptiles and Aquatic Creatures" are two of the more intriguing chapters. The examples from Pavelec's own art are so compelling that even if you don't want to draw beasties, you may want to pick up this useful guide.

Her Imperial Viciousness has returned.

Prepare to see Redd.

As the evil Redd struggles to regain the throne, battles rage, looking glasses explode, and Wonderland is once again caught between the forces of White Lacestar and the Black. Here is the last page before book 3 in the bestselling Looking Glass Wars trilogy.

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novel with a wide cross-genre appeal Told from the perspective of Matilda, a teenage resident of a South Pacific island ravaged by civil war, *Mister Pip* relates the story of how one of the island's "only whites," Mr. Watts, takes over teaching the island's children when the other teachers flee for safety As part of his curriculum, he reads to the students from Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* and they begin to fixate on the adventures of Pip in Victorian London Strife continues to strike the island and throughout it all, Mr. Watts keeps trying, in his way, to teach his students Although the novel gains great power from the effect of the Dickens readings on the students, and from Mr. Watts' eccentric character, ultimately it's the sincerity and clarity of Matilda's character and voice that lift this novel above the ordinary. Magic realist to its core, *Mister Pip* speaks to the power of the imagination and the fantastical in everyday life

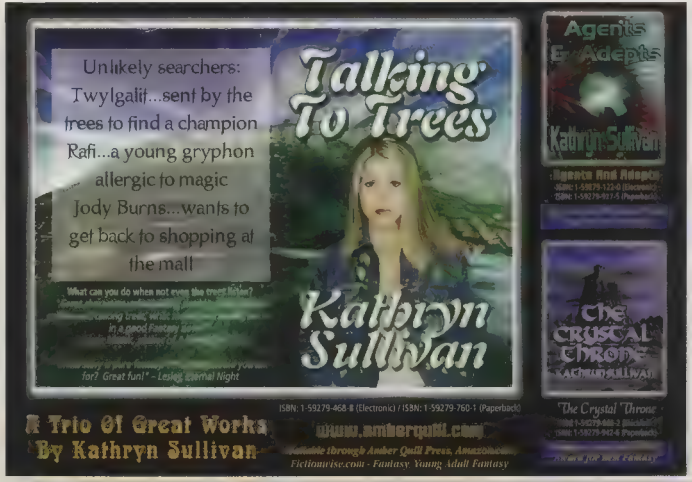
Red Seas Under Red Skies, Scott Lynch, Bantam Spectra, New York, 576 pp., hardcover, $23.00, ISBN 978-0-553-80468-3

For pure, unadulterated (and sophisticated) entertainment, you can't beat Scott Lynch. Another title for *Red Seas Under Red Skies* might be "Licking Our Wounds and Coming Back With a Vengeance " Locke Lamora, thief and con artist, is one of the most compelling characters in recent memory, and Lynch surrounds him with a bevy of fascinating sidekicks, enemies, and confidantes. From exile in distant Tal Verrar, Locke aims to rob the most secure gambling house in the world. The trouble he and his cohorts get into—and the way in which Lynch never lets Locke off the hook for past indiscretions—creates the context for some brilliant set-pieces Some of these set-pieces, as when Locke leads a pirate crew, might seem tangential to the plot, but it's all so much fun most readers won't complain Meanwhile, Locke's right-hand man, Jean, remains the perfect foil Although the interplay between Locke and Jean isn't of the same caliber of either Fritz Leiber's Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser or Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey and Maturin, it's often close to that quality. (Case in point: the lovely opening sequence, involving deadly crossbows.) There s the same fun here as in watching the *Ocean's* movies but with more cross-pollination of genres

The Kingdom of Bones, Stephen Gallagher, Shaye Areheart Books New York, 368 pp , hardcover, $24 95, ISBN: 978-0-307-38280 1

Set primarily in the England of the 1880s but also in 1903 Philadelphia and New Orleans, Stephen Gallagher's *The Kingdom of Bones* is part murder mystery, part occult thriller, and part loving re-creation of a bygone era Someone has been killing poor children, and Detective Inspector Sebastian Becker believes ex boxing champion Tom Sayers has something to do with the slayings. After an understated opening, the novel kicks into high gear when Sayers escapes arrest and tries to clear his name by finding the real killer In a move by Gallagher that will delight genre fans, Sayers enlists the help of Bram Stoker This leads Sayers into a world of possible occult influence and secrets that will change his life forever Throughout the novel, Gallagher's careful, restrained writing creates great tension and surprise Sebastian as the pursuing detective is convincing, but Gallagher's careful, often brilliant characterization of Sayers is *The Kingdom of Bones* main touchstone

Continued on page 106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still point

BY GRAHAM EDWARDS ILLUSTRATION BY TONY JHASTEEN

[redacted]

When you look into the abyss, the abyss is looking back at you. The same can be said for behemoths

"Hah!" snorted the behemoth. I dodged a ball of phlegm the size of a school bus. "You think that'll stop me?"

The behemoth advanced like an avalanche. Veins squirmed like pale pythons in its neck. Behind it, deep inside the labyrinth, I heard the rock walls creak.

"Eating me's an option," I said, backing away, "but have you considered another? Like maybe letting me out?"

The behemoth stopped and rolled its head all the way around, like an owl. It opened its maw and launched a series of colossal barks, loud as mortars. I dropped to my knees, hands at my ears, while my ribs tried to polka their way through my chest. Then I realized the behemoth was laughing.

"You think," it thundered, "I know the way out?"

I lowered my hands. "You mean you don't?"

The behemoth turned its head back around. In its man-like eyes there was something like pity.

"There is no way out," it growled. "You think I'd still be here if there was?"

I sank to the floor. I shrugged off my coat, turned it inside out three times until it was made of moleskin. A whole heap snugger than chain mail.

Curiosity.

"Come in," I said.

The door opened, revealing a thin, hooded man, pale and erect. He was quite dry—the rain just didn't want to touch him. Behind him the clouds were black and low. From inside the cloud's came the boom of a circling thunderbird.

"Good afternoon," said the man. I couldn't see a face beneath the hood, mostly because he didn't have one. "Do you know what day it is?"

I shrugged. I did know, of course, like I knew exactly who he was. I just didn't want to give him the pleasure.

The man drew a rolled parchment from the folds of his cloak. His arm moved in little jerks, like a heron's neck. The rain slithered past him. His fingers were like razor-edged chopsticks.

"It is my duty to inform you," said the hooded man, "that the lease on this property is due for immediate renewal. If you fail to submit the necessary down payment by midnight tonight, I shall be forced to terminate your contract. If you elect to remain on these premises after the last stroke of twelve, you will be forcibly evicted. Have a nice day."

Just as he finished speaking, his cloak fell open. I tried to look away, but couldn't.

"I wept as I ate my brother. It took three centuries—he was that big. For a while I was content."

"So, you going to eat me now?" I said.

"It's what they put me here to do."

I closed my eyes and dropped my hands into my lap. "Then you'd better get on with it."

I waited for one of the behemoth's tongues to cinch itself around my waist and drag me inside that enormous maw. Nothing happened. The behemoth gazed down at me, curious. It's weird to be able to read the expression on something the size of a city block.

"Why are you here?" said the behemoth.

I checked my watch. Eleven-thirty. Half an hour to go. I sighed. "It's a long story."

The behemoth arched one of its backs. Acres of ceiling embedded themselves in acres of floor.

"So tell it," said the behemoth.

I'd been doing my accounts. My desk was heaped with papers, the papers heaped with figures. My office felt like a cage. Outside, it was raining; inside, the air was thick with coffee fumes and cigarette smoke. I picked up a tax demand, stared at it until the numbers blurred, then balled it and hurled it across the room.

"I say, we might need that," said the calculator.

"Tax man won't save a sinking ship," I said. "Anyway, who said you could smoke?"

"It helps me concentrate, if you must know," said the calculator.

I hate that calculator. There's something smug about its antique LED display. I plucked the cigarette from its printer slot and stubbed it out on the keypad.

"Ow!"

"Serves you right. Look, I was thinking—maybe we should hire an assistant. Someone to handle the paperwork while I pound the streets."

"You can't afford my batteries, let alone another salary!"

"You're solar powered."

"It's the principle."

I realized I was arguing with a calculator.

"Go subtract yourself," I muttered, and switched off its brain.

Someone knocked at the door.

For a second I thought about sending them away. Who cared if it was a new client? My business was sunk. On the other hand, even when you're behind on the rent and the bailiffs are baying, part of you still hopes something'll turn up. Besides, I'm a private investigator, which means there's one thing that never shuts for business.

Inside the hooded man's cloak was a cavernous space filled with wooden scaffolding. His internal organs hung pulsating from a Chinese puzzle of struts connected by dangling strings and straws. Black termites bustled over the scaffolding from heart to lungs to liver, carrying tiny buckets of blood. When they saw me watching them, the termites stopped and crowded to the front of the hooded man's timber rib cage. Their eyes were huge and red and curious. I stared at the empty space inside the man's hood. I could feel his gaze like a wind, stiff and cold.

Landlords. They're all the same.

At last I managed to look away. I found myself staring at the mountain of papers on my desk. At all the bills, written in red. At the invoice ledger, empty.

"Terminate away," I said. "I'm finished."

The whole street shook as a thunderbird landed in the road and ripped up the delicatessen three doors down. I ducked as slates and salami rained from the sky. The landlord remained motionless.

The thunderbird flew back into the clouds, trailing bricks and bratwurst. I watched it disappear. When I looked back, the landlord was holding out a quill pen.

"Could I have that in writing?" he said.

I got up from my desk and slammed the door in his face.

"Come back at midnight," I said.

"Does it rain a lot?" said the behemoth. "Up there?"

"All the time," I replied.

"I miss the rain."

"It's overrated."

"So what happened next?"

"What else could I do? I went to the cops."

I sat in the office of the Captain of Police, drinking strong coffee and feeling wretched.

The office was empty but I knew the Captain wouldn't mind me getting comfortable. The Captain and I, we go way back. We knew each other long before he sold me the detective business, even before he was robbing banks. But that's another story. The point is, I'm one of the few people he lets use his real name.

The secretary looked up from her typing. She glared at me through the blinds separating Jimmy's office from hers. Like most cops, she was a zombie. The undead make a killer police force: no imagination and

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a crafty knack of absorbing shotgun blasts. The downside is your average cop looks like roadkill shoveled into a blue uniform. The secretary looked better than most, at least she had half a face

I checked my watch. Not that I needed to. Jimmy the Griff is always on time

Right on cue, the air above the Captain's chair started to boil. Fish rained down from the ceiling. The fish dropped into the dust, grew legs, and waddled under the desk. A dust devil marked the progress of a temporal anomaly making its way across the floor, through the wall, and into the next office, where it swallowed up the zombie secretary. She emerged from the whirlwind with all her skin back on again. She raised suddenly youthful hands to a face that was unexpectedly whole. Not only that, it was gorgeous. She started to sob

Then, with a sound like eggs on a griddle, Jimmy the Griff materialized.

"Hear you got trouble," he said, growing a thick red beard in a fraction of a second.

"No trouble," I said. "Just business. Or lack of it."

"Same all over."

Jimmy was right. It wasn't just me. Some days it felt like the whole city was heading for Hades in a biscuit barrel

For a start there were the thunderbirds: they'd flown in a few months back, making the odd raid, generally causing trouble. Recently they'd stepped up their air strikes (guano bombs—very nasty) to the point where folks were scared to walk out in the day, let alone by night. But it wasn't just the thunderbirds: the alligators had blockaded the sewers, the wildwood was licking at the suburbs and you couldn't buy insurance for love or money—even the Titans were calling in their debts. Everything in the city was going liquid in a hurry.

Including my business.

"You think the world's ending, Jimmy?"

"Always."

Jimmy evolved into an emaciated yellow giant with huge shark eyes and a drooping mustache. He had to stoop to avoid weaning the ceiling like a sombrero. When he began to walk and talk backwards, I had to look away, my eyes and teeth ached. They always do when Jimmy's around. Through the blinds I could see the secretary admiring her newly restored flesh in a compact mirror.

The thing is this: ever since he beat Kronos at chess, Jimmy the Griff has existed outside the regular flow of time. He stalks eternity in every conceivable direction. He goes backward and forward. He comes and he goes. Sometimes he does it all at once. And every where he travels, Jimmy upsets the temporal balance. In a big way

"Jimmy—I just came by to tell you I'm shutting up shop," I said "I thought you might like to know."

Jimmy stopped moving, collapsed into something resembling the breathing body of a man, and groaned. I hate it when Jimmy grins. He's got too many teeth, mostly the wrong shape. And they move around.

"Got a job for you," Jimmy said. A small reptile scurried from under his desk and evolved into a dainty green bird.

"A job? Didn't you hear me? I said I'm finished. The landlord called by. My lease is up and I can't afford to renew it—not that there's any clients on the books to pay the rent even if I could. It's over, Jimmy. I mean, thanks for getting me started all those years back but it's over. Finito. I'm done. I quit. I'm leaving town. I just came to say goodbye."

Jimmy shrank into the body of a baby and wet himself.

"Job's good," he said. "Pays well. Up your alley."

"Forget it. There's nothing you can—"

"Surveillance."

"—say that'll make me ..."

"Bank vault."

"—change my mind because . . ."

"The big one."

I stopped talking. I breathed out slowly. The dainty green bird's head expanded to accommodate a gigantic brain. Its tiny beak grew fur and began to clatter out binary code. Then its skull exploded.

"The Still Point of the Turning World!" I said, wiping bird brain from the rim of my coffee cup. My heart was trying to climb out of my throat. Jimmy stared at me. Only one of his eyes was spinning. "This got anything to do with the end of the world, Jimmy?"

"Curious?" he said.

Next door, the secretary screamed as a fresh dust devil crept up behind her. Her newly blonde hair caught fire and all the flesh abandoned her bones, leaving a greasy skeleton grinning dismally into the mirror. Moaning, she put down the compact and went back to her typing.

"I guess I'm good 'til midnight," I said. "Tell me more."

All the city's banks stand on that narrow leg of land between the Street of Fools and the River Lethe. It's what you might call prime real estate: a whole heap of big prizes stashed in even bigger vaults.

None bigger than the vault that holds the Still Point of the Turning World.

The SPTW is stashed in a bank called the Birdhouse. It's not as cute as it sounds. For a start, the whole bank is underground: there's no walls, just a little hatch in the ground like a baby subway entrance. The Birdhouse is full of tunnels and each tunnel's full of traps. Reception's on the two hundredth floor, counting down. If you make it that far, they give you a badge and a chaperone. The last rites too, if you're lucky.

Farther down it's more traps. This is where you find the chaperone's no help at all. She just stands and watches while the traps try to mash you up. You survive too long, she slits your throat.

The Birdhouse is a private concern. It's run by the Ancient Order of Thanes and its only purpose is to keep the Fools away from the SPTW. As for the Fools themselves, well, I don't like to say too much about them. They're the worst kind of bad. Not so much evil—they don't know the meaning of the word—more meddlesome: they just love to take things apart. Trouble is, they don't much like putting them back together. And if they ever got down to the Birdhouse's vault, got their hands on the SPTW, well

Everyone's got their own idea what the SPTW is. Some say it's like a dance. Others say it's more like the center of a dance without it, the dance couldn't exist. Me, I've got two left feet, so none of that figures. All I know is, the Thanes tell us the SPTW needs protecting at all costs. And I mean all. I believe what they say. You ever meet a Thane, you'll know why. Everything the Fools are, the Thanes aren't. Put the two together and you get a kind of cosmic war. A war that's going on right now, mostly behind the scenes. Been going on since the beginning. Looks to be ending soon though. Interesting times.

All of which is by the by. Jimmy's interest was this: the Birdhouse's surveillance gear extends way beyond the Birdhouse's boundaries. Actually it covers half the city. Which is useful for the cops. So Jimmy's made this deal with the Thanes: he supplies additional security to the Birdhouse in exchange for surveillance data. The Thanes get unkillable zombie cops with big guns. Jimmy gets a live feed from the best crime blackspots this side of the Lethe.

The reason Jimmy wanted to hire me was simple: He suspected one of the cops he'd assigned to the Birdhouse was planning to blow the vault. And that's why he wanted me to stake the place out. Because if this bank job went ahead, it'd be more than just front page news.

It'd be the end of the world.

"I don't get it," said the behemoth. "Why don't Jimmy just change his team? I say you got a bad banana, you crush the bunch."

A good point. I would have answered but the behemoth's severed tongue had spotted me again. It whipped toward me, babbling something in ancient Sumerian. I side-stepped and the tongue crashed into the tunnel wall. Swearing in an obscure Mongolian dialect, it reared like a cobra.

I wished my coat was still chain mail. I looked around for something I could use as a weapon. There was nothing.

"I could use some help here," I said to the behemoth.

The tongue inched toward me on its bloody rear end. Its pointed tip was curled high above my head, dripping cloudy sputum. Where the sputum hit the floor, the floor hissed. The tongue said something

witty in Hebrew, but I didn't get the joke.

"And I should bother?" said the behemoth

The tongue stabbed at me. I batted it aside. It was like punching a truck. As the tongue recoiled, I sprinted to the opposite wall, shaking off my coat as I ran. The tongue skidded after me, singing opera.

"If you don't help me," I said, turning my coat inside out, "you'll never hear the rest of the story."

"As if it was interesting," said the behemoth.

The tongue, switching effortlessly between scat, rap, and Swahili, made to wrap itself around my waist. I flung on my coat. Now the coat's lining was the softest sable. On the outside it was mostly razor wire.

The tongue realized its mistake too late. It tried to pull back but it was already snagged. It threw me about like pizza dough, then dropped to the floor in roughly a thousand pieces.

I stepped through the lake of gore, shook my coat clean and turned it back to moleskin.

"Thanks for nothing," I said.

"So what happened next?" said the behemoth.

"Oh, now you're interested?"

"There's not many make it all the way down here. Me, I like to know something about who I'm eating. It's a respect thing."

"I'll make you a deal," I said. "I'll tell you the rest of my story ... if you tell me yours."

Silence. The almost-human eyes closed and the huge body tightened up like Odin's scrotum in the swimming pool of the gods. I made ready to die. Again.

After about half a lifetime, the behemoth opened its eyes.

"I birthed before the stars got hot," said the behemoth. "My mother, she loved me until I ate my way out of her womb. It was cold, but her flesh . . it kept me warm. She screamed, but I got to like that. After an age, she didn't scream anymore.

"I wasn't alone. I wandered with my friends. Sometimes I ate them. It was all different then—no worlds, just spinning discs. Everything always on the move, especially me. Everything around us was young, and we were old, and we were the masters.

"Then the worlds fell together. The gods came and went, like they do. We ignored them and they ignored us. But then, one day, we ran into the Fools.

"They hunted us through the wastelands, the Fools. They wanted to see how we were made. But they didn't take us apart, not right away. First they caught us. Then they made us gladiators. The Fools built great arenas and watched behemoths fight each other to the death.

"I was lucky. The Fools never caught me. Eventually I got too big even for their arenas, so they lost interest. Behemoths don't digest, you see. No guts. We eat, but we never take a shit. That's why we get so big and live so long. The stuff we take in just never goes away. So we never go away. Sometimes that's all right. Most times it isn't.

"The other thing is, behemoths eat mostly other behemoths. We like to eat only what we understand. Like I said, it's a respect thing. That's what the Fools enjoyed about the gladiator contests: that moment the winner started to feast. They liked to watch us coming apart, one limb at a time.

"I wept as I ate my brother. It took three centuries—he was that big. For a while I was content.

"Then my belly began to rumble.

"I went back to wandering. I got hungrier and hungrier. Oh, I ate. But nothing filled me up. And I knew nothing ever would.

"Then the Thanes found me."

"And what did they do? The Thanes?"

I'd sat myself down against the wall, as far from the diced tongue as I could get. All that gore stank worse than a thunderbird bomb crater. The floor was too hard to be comfortable, but my legs felt like string.

"Tell me more of your story first," said the behemoth. It looked more slumped than before. I thought that maybe, a couple of miles back down the tunnels, parts of the behemoth had sat down too.

"What is this?" I said. "Two-handed Scheherazade?"

"You know, I still got an appetite here."

The reason Jimmy didn't just pull out the whole squad and replace it with a fresh one was simple. You remember how I said zombie cops have no imagination? It's true. That makes them kind of like a herd. Which means if one cop's bent on making trouble, chances are they're all ready to follow suit. The only answer is to catch the bent one in the act and make an example. A public—and preferably messy—example. Herd mentality, you see: you head off the leader, all the rest change direction too.

That's why Jimmy wanted someone on the inside. Someone who wasn't a cop. Me.

Before he went back to the future, Jimmy gave me a map and a name. Then, for a second, the office was full of extreme weather. When the storm lifted, Jimmy was gone. I peeped through the blinds to see if his secretary was okay, but she'd long since turned to dust. As I watched, a zombie slouched in wearing an apron and carrying a vacuum cleaner.

I went straight to the Birdhouse. The map got me past the first batch of traps. The name got me my badge and my chaperone. The rest was up to me.

"Is it your turn yet?" I said.

"I'll tell you when you're done," said the behemoth.

My chaperone was an angel.

She was a beauty, no argument. Tall as a forest and sharp as champagne. She was white and gold and gorgeous. Her gown was made of gossamer and clung to her frame like dew. Her wings were sheer as smoke. I couldn't keep my eyes off her.

No wonder I walked straight into the first trap.

"This why they hired you?" I said as the floor clamped lobster-claws round my ankles.

"I don't know what you mean," said the angel. Her toes hovered above the floor. Her voice floated like frothed cream.

The walls of the corridor started grinding toward me like the jaws of a vice.

Her gown was made of gossamer and clung to her frame like dew. Her wings were sheer as smoke.

"So, our numbers dwindled. Soon, time came there weren't so many behemoths left. Then just a few. Finally, two.

"We met on a barren world. You don't need to know where. We faced each other, and we talked. Should we duel to the death? Play a game of chance? Ask the gods to decide? We were both of us hungry. Trouble was, we both knew the hunger to come would be worse. We knew that, for the winner, this would be the last decent meal. Ever.

"So we tossed a coin.

"I lost.

"Eye candy," I gasped. It was getting hard to talk, on account of the giant scorpion that had just grabbed me around the chest. "View like that ... no wonder the guests never leave."

The scorpion coiled its tail over my head. Venom dripped on the brim of my fedora. Spikes sprang from the moving walls. I closed my eyes.

"Enough!" said the angel in a new voice that was less like froth and more like fire.

At once the trap reversed itself: the crustaceans disappeared into

their caves; the spikes slipped into hiding, the walls fled. Cautiously I checked myself over. The angel was watching me, a furious look on her heartbreaking face.

"How dare you!" she said. There was fire, I could see, licking around the corners of her rosebud mouth.

"Uh, what?" I was checking the corridor for escape routes. All the doors looked like traps to me. They probably were.

"You think I'm only good to distract the punters?" She folded her arms across her chest. Interesting shapes moved under her gossamer gown. I stared at them. "Stop staring at me!"

"Kind of proves my point," I said.

"I'm more than just a pretty face."

"I can see that." I said, still concentrating on the gown.

For a minute I thought she'd flame me. Instead, her smoky wings dissolved and she fell to the floor, face buried in her hands. Her gown billowed up, flashing legs like ivory scissors. Then she started to cry.

I knew I should run. I'd planned to lose the chaperone at the first opportunity and work through the traps myself. I wouldn't get a better chance.

Instead, like a sap, I went over to the fallen angel and offered her a tissue.

"It's all right," she sobbed. "I'll use this." She lifted a corner of her gown to dab her eyes, revealing a glossy expanse of thigh. I didn't push the issue.

"I'm sorry, miss," I said. "But you're a looker, and that's the truth. Guy comes down here—he'll look at you, simple as that. Nothing to be ashamed of."

"I know," said the angel, wiping the tears from her porcelain cheeks. "But I want more. I want people to see the real me—what's underneath, you know?"

"What's underneath." I said, "is always of interest."

Suddenly the angel grabbed my collar and pulled me close. She smelled like cloves and honey. Inside her eyes, tiny galaxies were colliding.

"Can you help me?" she said. "I want to get out of here! I'm fed up with this life, this job. There must be more to the world than this wretched Birdhouse. I want, I want ... I want to spread my wings and fly!"

She let go of my collar and launched herself into the air. Smoke boiled from her back. Her hair fanned like a fountain of gold.

I looked up at her, captivated.

"What's your name?" I said.

"Deliciosa," said the angel.

I got me an idea.

"Well, Deliciosa" I said, "did you ever think about a career in private investigation?"

"You fell for her!" said the behemoth.

"That's crazy. I just offered her a job."

"Nothing to do with this flimsy little gown you kept going on about?"

"What gown?"

"I thought you couldn't afford an assistant."

"She had aptitude."

"That what you call it?"

"I figured with a dame in the office I might get more trade."

"Dress the window with a pretty face?"

"Isn't it your turn with the tale-telling?"

"Your story's more interesting than mine."

"Who's judging?"

"You think you can tell a behemoth what to do?"

I paused. There was a jag in one of the behemoth's eyes that might have been rage. Only I thought it was something else.

Anguish?

"Quit stalling," I said. "Talk!"

"So there I was," said the behemoth, "hungry and alone, a cosmic vagabond. When the Thanes first picked me up I thought they were Fools in disguise. Then they unveiled and I wondered how I could have thought such a thing.

"There's nothing in all the worlds like them, the Thanes. Big as gods but humbler. Kinder. They're older than many, though not as old as some. Not as old as me. But their mission, that's the oldest of all. The Thanes protect. They're protectors. They protect us all. That's what they do. It's what they are.

"And the Thanes—they know that even if everything falls, if the borderlands go to dust and the big dark places spill shadows over the little worlds, even if all that happens, there's one treasure that must be held safe: the Still Point of the Turning World. The Fools, they'll come again—maybe sooner than you'd think—but when that day comes, the Thanes, they'll stand before the Fools, one by one. They'll fall if they must, one by one. Somehow they'll make it so the dance goes on. Somehow.

"Have you ever seen a Thane? I have. One came to me in my dark time. My lonely time. He was .. like music. Heartbreaking music. His voice was a song, a rhythm in the round. Just thinking of him is a symphony. Can't you hear it?

"When he stood before me, I wasn't hungry anymore.

"The Thane said to me, "You might serve me, child of the dawn. And, if you believe in all that turns, it is a service in which you may one day find peace.'

"What could I say? A Thane comes along and offers you peace. What do you do?

"I said yes.

"Next thing, I was falling. Next thing after that, I landed here. The gate closed. And the Thane went away.

"I shouted. I threw myself against the labyrinth walls. I cursed and wailed. It didn't make any difference. He'd cheated me and there was nothing I could do.

"Oh, there was plenty to eat. Plenty of intruders. They came. I ate them. I did what the Thane asked. I did my job. For ten million years. I did my job, waiting for the peace to come."

The behemoth reared over me like a hammer over an anvil.

"You ever get to where nothing makes sense anymore? You ever get so you just want to turn over and stop moving? Because I got there exactly five thousand years ago! The end of my tether! I stopped eating, I stopped sleeping. You want to know why? I'll tell you! I found out the labyrinth can deal with the intruders all by itself. The Thanes, they didn't need a guard. The labyrinth does everything. It's self-cleaning. The only thing it won't flush away is me! I'm surplus to requirement, a hood ornament. Nothing I ever did down here counted for anything. You know how that feels, gumshoe? You really know?"

I thought about my shabby little office, and the pile of unpaid bills, and that damn self-righteous calculator. I thought about the landlord and all the back rent I owed him. I thought about how, ten years ago, I'd bought a two-bit private detective business off Jimmy the Griff because I believed in the truth. Only now the world was just about out of juice, and all I'd learned was that telling a client the truth is like shooting them in the guts. They come to you hoping for a miracle; most times what they get is proof that someone they love is a liar.

"I guess maybe I do," I said.

The behemoth turned away. "It's your turn now!"

"Does your story have a happy ending?"

"Does yours?"

"I wish I knew."

"You got to the part where you fell for the angel."

"It was a business arrangement!"

"That's what they all say."

I let Deliciosa lead the way down to level seven hundred and five, which was where Jimmy's cops were patrolling. Her knowledge of the security systems meant we made good time.

"If you had managed to give me the slip," said Deliciosa as we approached the big door marked 705, "how would you have got past that last batch of traps?"

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"I'll show you," I said. Stopping short of the door, I brought out what I'd been carrying in my pocket and gave it to her.

"What is it?" said Deliciosa. She turned it over in her hand. "A coin? It's very heavy."

"It's called a Peeping Tom."

"What does it do?"

I took back the Peeping Tom, turned it inside-out and opened up three of its spare dimensions. "Take a look."

She peered inside. "I can see what's on the other side of the door! There's . . oh, there's a policeman there."

"What's he doing?"

"It looks like he's scooping his left leg back into his trousers. This is amazing. How does it work?"

"It's a hole," I explained. "A hole in reality. I got it from a friend of mine, oh, years ago. It's got all this spare cosmic geometry tucked up inside—so much that it actually contains the entire universe. That's why it's so heavy."

"It's very small," said Deliciosa dubiously.

"It used to be bigger. Thing is, each time you use it, the Peeping Tom gets smaller. Actually it's mostly used up now. Next turn or two it'll vanish altogether."

"And this is what you use to spot the traps?"

"Peeping Tom shows you anything you want to see. It's a tool of the trade. Short range though."

Deliciosa was shaking the Peeping Tom around, peering this way and that. She looked eager. The eagerness just made her more beautiful. "I can see six cops altogether," she said. "All zombies. They look as if they're waiting for something." Angel eyes turned toward me, shining with excitement. "Is this what you call a stake-out?"

"Surveillance," I murmured.

"So what happens next?"

"This," I said.

I took the Peeping Tom from Deliciosa's slender fingers, folded it up, and dropped it back in my pocket. I reached up, pressed my hands to each of her cheeks and drew her face down to mine. She had to bend at the waist; I had to stand on tiptoe. The scent of cloves and honey was overwhelming. Her hair fell on me like golden blossom. Her smoky wings turned silver, shot through with electric stabs of light.

And I drank in my first angel's kiss.

"What did I say?" crowed the behemoth. "I said it! I said you wanted to feel her up! Didn't I say it?"

"I did not 'feel her up.'"

"As good as. "Angel's kiss"! You won't go to heaven!"

"It was very pure. Very chaste."

"And her with that gown!"

"Forget I mentioned it!"

The behemoth leaned close and sniffed at my face. I struggled against the suction.

"The kiss was true!" it said after a minute's thought. "I can smell it on you. You poor schmuck—you really did fall for her."

I stared at the ground. My eyes were stinging and my breath was hot sandpaper in my throat.

"What does it matter now?" I said.

The behemoth extended a nodule of flesh and draped it over my shoulders. It was hard and heavy as a bolster of coal. Yet it was a comfort.

"What happened?" said the behemoth.

The kissing went on, the way kissing can. I lost my grip on time. Part of me wondered if this was how Jimmy felt when he went surfing through eternity. If it was, I understood why he never wanted to come back.

"If you're an angel," I said, my lips fluttering against hers, "how come you're not in heaven?"

"Work release," said Deliciosa. "It's all very progressive. Put your hand there."

"So would they approve?" I said. "If you came to work for me? Instead of the chaperoning? There?"

"I don't care. Detective work—it's what I've always wanted to do, ever since I was a little angel. No just . there. You must lead such an exciting life!"

"Oh, there. Yeah, there's excitement, if you call shivering in dark alleys exciting, or pounding the streets in the pouring rain exciting, or chasing names through the telephone directory exciting."

"But don't you get a thrill when you finally track down a suspect, or find a missing person? Isn't it all about discovering the truth? Do what you were doing a minute ago."

"The truth? Yeah, it's all about the truth. Only the truth isn't the cute pony folks think it is. Truth's a crazy stallion with foam on its mane and madness in its eye. You give it an apple it'll bite your fingers off. With most folks, you tell them the truth, all they want to do is punch you in the face. You mean this?"

"But it's still the truth! And each moment of truth in this small, real world is a tiny piece of heaven brought to earth. Believe me, I know."

He materialized from the shadows, cloak hanging low, feet moving but never quite touching the ground.

Yes, that. Do that, do that, oh do that.

We'd have lost ourselves altogether if the explosion hadn't brought us back to our senses. We flew apart, faces hot and numb, arms and legs tingling. I dropped six feet to the floor and realized I'd been flying.

Deliciosa alighted next to me, her gown folding over me like milk. In front of us, the big door marked 705 was buckled and hanging off its hinges. Black smoke filled the corridor beyond.

I caught Deliciosa's eye. Her white china face was flushed pink.

"Trouble?" she said in a husky, eager way that lit a bonfire in my boots.

"What else?" I replied. "Jimmy thinks his cops are planning a heist. And you know what?"

"What?"

"I reckon we just walked in on it."

We found them on the other side of the smoke: six zombie cops and a set of shattered elevator doors. The sign above the doors said LABYRINTH—EMERGENCY ACCESS. As Deliciosa and I burst out of the smoke, the biggest zombie looked round and grinned like a bowl of tripe.

"What do we do?" said Deliciosa. She was afloat again, head bobbing just beneath the ceiling, gown billowing, face aglow. I'd never seen anything look so alive.

"Jimmy said not to engage them," I said. "Let's get their numbers and scram."

"But we've got to do something!"

Before I could stop her, Deliciosa had reached into my shoulder holster and drawn my gun.

"Drop your weapons!" she shouted.

The six zombies peered at us, oozing but unafraid.

"Thass a weeny gun," said the big zombie.

"It's a six-shooter," I said. "Convenient, wouldn't you say?"

"Weeny bullets—they don't knocks us down. Don't you knows that?"

"Those bullets do."

I was bluffing, of course. But I was just trying to buy time.

I pulled out the Peeping Tom and tossed it to Deliciosa. "Swap you for the gun. We need Jimmy. Use this to locate him. If the Peeping Tom can get a lock on him, he'll feel it. And he'll come running."

"What if he isn't within range?"

"Just try! Now throw me the gun!"

Meanwhile the zombies were closing in. I'll say this about the undead: they lurch faster than you'd think.

"I can hardly see anything at all," said Deliciosa, frantically spinning the Peeping Tom this way and that. "It's shrunk so small! and there's no sign of your friend."

Disgusted, she stuffed the Peeping Tom back in my pocket and balled her fists. The Peeping Tom had shrunk to the size of a pea. I figured we could use it once more before it vanished forever. I waggled the gun and made threats I couldn't keep.

Then the zombies were on us.

Two of them grabbed Deliciosa by the ankles and dragged her to the floor. The other four fell on me. I lashed the big one across the jaw with the gun. It was like driving a hammer into raw steak. The big zombie recoiled, then gaped fit to swallow a melon and closed yellow teeth on the gun. The gun crumpled, but not before it went off. The back of the big zombie's head pebbledashed the ceiling.

"Thass not funny," said the zombie. When he opened his mouth I could see clear through his skull to the wall beyond. "Let's makes him one of us! Boys—iss voodoo time!"

My guts liquefied. Being dead's one thing. Having your soul wrung through the mangle of zombie voodoo . . . that's quite another.

The big zombie held me down while his buddies rolled back their eyes and began chanting. Behind them, the two zombies grappling with Deliciosa had her pinned to the floor. Tall as she was, she weighed almost nothing. Her gown was ripped open and her hair was matted with zombie gore. I shouted to her and got a mouthful of squelching fist for my trouble.

The chanting reached a crescendo. The big zombie bared his teeth and bent them to my throat. One of the zombies holding Deliciosa did the same to her.

"No!" I yelled.

The thing about zombies is this. Even though they work the same way as vampires—one bite and you're reaching for the sunglasses—they're a lot messier about it. A vampire will seduce you with sweet music and fine wine before nuzzling your neck with teeth as soft as satin. A zombie, on the other hand, chews you like liver to the thrash of death metal and grievous bodily harm. You want to be undead? goes the zombie subtext. Well, first you gotta be dead. Very dead!

"I thought you were cops," I managed to say. "What happened to the pledge of allegiance?"

"You's about to take it!" said the big zombie, drooling bloody pus into my face.

Then his head left his shoulders and went bowling down the corridor like a sack of mutton. The stump of his neck dropped on to my chest, jetting vile black stuff down my coat. I hate that.

The chanting stopped. I peered through a rain of ichor to see Deliciosa rising up with a zombie in each hand. Her wings were a blur. A very sharp-edged blur. With each beat they took a fresh slice out of the zombies. Soon her hands were empty and the floor was stacked with what looked like moldy pork chops.

Hovering there, dark blood draining from her fingertips, gossamer gown shredded to strings, eyes like twin suns, she didn't look like an angel at all. She looked like a goddess.

The remaining three zombies exchanged glances, then bolted down the corridor. They slipped through an innocent-looking doorway and were crushed to pulp by a descending ceiling.

I shucked off the remains of the big zombie and rose, trembling, to my feet.

"You're not bad in a tight corner," I said.

Her body glowing in all kinds of astonishing places, Deliciosa descended and planted a searing kiss on my lips.

"No," she said. "Are we partners yet?"

"Let's get this case closed." It's hard to speak when your mouth's on fire. "Then we'll talk business."

We stepped over the remains of the elevator doors and peered down the gaping shaft.

"Does this go all the way down to the Still Point?" I said. "Seems too easy."

"It goes all the way to the labyrinth," said Deliciosa. "And the labyrinth leads to the Still Point."

"If the zombies had gone down there, would they have got past the behemoth?"

Frowning, Deliciosa thought about this. "I don't know," she said. "But you know what zombies are like, no matter what you do to them they still keep coming back for more."

Deliciosa had such a look on her face while she was thinking stuff through. It was even more beautiful than what her tattered gown was suddenly failing to conceal.

It was last thing I saw of her, that look.

There was a sound like a bowling ball rolling over a cattle grid. Something smashed Deliciosa to the floor. The thing rolled up her body, opened jaws fit to swallow a melon and clamped itself on to her immaculate throat.

It was the big zombie's severed head. Deliciosa had been right. they always come back for more.

Angel blood sprayed like quicksilver. Deliciosa arched her back, drummed her hands and heels, lashed like a whip. And she did it all without uttering a sound, even at the end. In a way that was the worst of it.

All the life crashed out of her in a single breath. There was no gradual draining away. One second she was a vital, fighting thing, the next she was just . . . a thing. Her beautiful face—streaked with silver blood—lolled in my direction.

In front of me, Deliciosa died.

Then she opened eyes.

"Down you go," the undead angel growled.

One perfect leg kicked out and sent me skidding into the elevator shaft. I did the only thing I could do.

I fell.

The behemoth let me shiver quietly for a while. Then it said, "Good job that zombie angel can't follow you down."

I looked up. Incredibly, I hadn't thought of that. "How does that work?" I said.

"Elevator shaft's disposable. Like a razor. It works once, then throws itself away. That's why you're doomed to remain down here 'til you die."

"Thanks for cheering me up."

I stood up and paced the floor. I was shaking all over. Glancing down, I realized I was walking over the exact spot where the behemoth's tongue had been lying. Now the tongue was gone, every last scrap of it.

"The floor's clean," I said. "How does that work?"

"Labyrinth is alive," said the behemoth. "It grooms itself. Very hygienic."

I ran my hands down my face. I felt cold and empty. I'd run out of words to say. Pretty soon, I figured, it would be time to find a dark, silent spot, sit down and just stop breathing.

"My story's told," I said. "That makes it your turn. A deal's a deal."

The behemoth stretched. I heard distant parts of the labyrinth give way.

"Actually," it said, "there's not much left to tell."

"Five thousand years ago I reached the end of my tether. I was ready to end it all. That was when the Thanes came and told me what they really wanted me to do.

"You remember how I said nothing a behemoth eats ever comes out again? That means the inside of a behemoth is as secure a place as you'll find anywhere in the cosmos. You put something inside a behemoth, it stays there. Forever.

"Can you see where this is going, gumshoe? How good a detective are you? Can you guess the truth?"

I gazed into the seven tunnels ahead of me, and the seven tunnels behind. I thought it through.

"They made you eat it," I said at last. "Five thousand years ago you swallowed the Still Point of the Turning World. It's inside you, right now. You're the vault!"

"Last meal I ever had," said the behemoth, its lower lips trembling. "Now I'm full. At last, I'm full."

"You're not here to guard the labyrinth at all—it's here to guard you!"

I opened my mouth. I closed it. My watch chimed twelve. I felt my life turn over and change forever. I also felt the behemoth bristle.

"How did he get down here?" it said.

He materialized from the shadows, cloak hanging low, feet moving but never quite touching the ground. The space inside his hood was as black and empty as ever, but his cloak was hanging wide open. All the woodwork that held him together was in motion: pawls dragged ratchets; cams spun like hunchbacks; sprung levers twitched and twanged. The noise from his wooden guts was forced and dreadful, like arthritis. Inside him the termites swarmed, black and wild, slopping blood from their buckets so the hooded man was surrounded by a dank, red mist.

"Time's up," said the landlord.

"I'm on a case," I said. "A paying job. Give me another day, I'll give you next month's rent in advance."

"Too late, gumshoe."

Behind me, the behemoth snarled. "He shouldn't be here!"

The landlord grew to twice his normal height and extended one chopstick hand. In it he held the lease to my office. He held out his other hand, palm up.

"The key," he said.

"He shouldn't be here," the behemoth repeated.

"None of us should," I said.

"But he's not what he seems. He looks like a landlord but he's more. He's one of the Fools!"

"You can call me Mister Fee," said the landlord. His cloak was sweating blood.

"Is it true?" I said. "Are you a Fool?"

"Names get in the way, don't you think?"

"How did you get here?"

"Nothing comes between a landlord and his rent."

"Are you here to destroy the SPTW?"

"Your key!"

Suddenly I couldn't control my body. And I mean my whole body. For the few seconds it took the landlord to puppeteer my hand into my pocket, take out the front door key to my office and hand it over, the monster was operating everything. I could feel him squeezing my heart, pumping my lungs like bellows, squirting every last thought from one brain cell to the next. It was like having squatters in your undershorts, only worse. Much worse.

The behemoth was paralyzed too. Its maw gaped wide, frozen in the act of trying to gobble the landlord down.

"Don't ever do that again!" I gasped when the landlord finally let go. But he'd already turned his back on me. Lifting his spindly arm, he plunged my key into the still-frozen behemoth's enormous cheek.

White light painted the entire labyrinth. For an instant I could see every tunnel exposed, like an X-ray. I could see the hidden bones of the behemoth, as big as the pillars that hold up the sky.

Then the light condensed into a narrow rectangle, exactly as big as a door. A door in the face of the behemoth.

The landlord—who was really a Fool—turned the key and the door opened wide.

"It is there!" said the landlord in the sudden silence. "The Still Point of the Turning World!"

And it was.

You'd have thought there'd be thunderclaps, or a howling wind, maybe a choir. There was none of that. Instead there was a set of steps, heading up into a kind of creamy cloud. The cloud was made of knives or pillows, or maybe it was a fog of disembodied thoughts. Whatever it was, it wasn't moving. Not at all. Through the open doorway I could hear the immense stillness of the heart of creation. Against that, all the sounds of the world were like an orchestra of untuned fiddles. I could hear traffic rumbling in the street, nine hundred and ninety-nine floors above. I could hear my own internal organs creaking and splashing, as clumsy and obscene in their way as the landlord's wooden insides. I could hear the rush of a trillion gas molecules through my ears. I could feel the whole endless round of the vast and turning world to which I and all who breathe cling like termites. And, on the other side of the door, I could see the single still point about which everything revolves.

Something screamed in my ear.

I yelled, leaped backward. Razor-edged chopsticks took a chunk out of my collar.

"Don't want you following me!" screamed the landlord. Blood fountained from beneath his cloak. "Let me take you apart!"

I tried to take off my coat but the landlord's chopstick fingers had clamped my arms to my sides. The landlord had grown huge. Huge and impossible. He seethed. The blackness in his hood loomed over me. I started to make out shapes inside it. Shapes I didn't want to see.

My hands scrabbled uselessly in my pockets, seeking the gun I knew wasn't there. Then my fingers chanced on something tiny, the size of a pea.

I pulled it out. It was the Peeping Tom. It had just enough energy left for one more bit of surveillance.

"Hey," I said. My arms were trapped but all I needed was my fingers. I unwrapped all but one of the Peeping Tom's hidden dimensions. "Take a look at this."

The landlord stopped. He peered inside the Peeping Tom.

"You ever seen anything like that before?" I said. The chopstick fingers loosened a little. I could have wriggled free but I didn't want to disturb his concentration.

The landlord stopped screaming and leaned closer.

"You want a better look?" I said. "Why don't you go all the way in?"

Yanking my arms loose, I grabbed the Peeping Tom's one remaining dimension, stretched it all the way out and wrapped it over the landlord's head.

The landlord started screaming again.

The Peeping Tom held its shape for a single instant, then its energy was finally spent. It collapsed like a punctured balloon, swallowing itself down to a naked singularity in the time it takes to say "pop."

It swallowed the landlord too.

"You say your kind can't be killed?" I said as the singularity dropped through the floor and sidestepped into a parallel and notoriously noxious universe. "I say you're a Fool."

A second after the landlord vanished, the behemoth's maw slammed shut on the empty space where he'd just been standing. I held still, four inches away from teeth like standing stones, sharpened to a point.

"Guess you got your appetite back," I said.

"I'd have eaten him if I could," replied the behemoth.

I felt my eyes being dragged back to the weird doorway piercing the behemoth's cheek, back to the agonizing beauty of the Still Point. My guts were turning to water; my heart felt ready to burst.

"Does it hurt?" I said.

"Tingles a bit," said the behemoth softly. "Most days I hardly know it's there."

"I guess ..." I said, faltering, "I guess ... we should close it up again."

"Give me a minute," said a voice at once strange and familiar, "and you can."

I lacked the strength to look round. Wiping away tears, I waited for whatever was going to happen next.

His shadow came first, followed by his legs. Finally he was standing between me and the doorway: a small, round man with red hair and a yellow jacket and spats. I'd never seen him before in my life. Yet I knew him.

IMAGINE A PLACE

WHERE ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE,
NOTHING IS BEYOND REASON,
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"Who the hell are you?" I said. "And why do you smell of fish?"

"Nice trick with the Peeping Tom," said the familiar stranger "Knew you could do it. Knew you would do it, tell the truth. I've seen it all before."

Then it clicked

"Jimmy?"

And it was Jimmy, as I'd never seen him before collapsed into a single moment. Jimmy the Griff, here and now, and only now. Somehow he'd slipped the shackles of past and future and planted himself firmly in the present. I wondered how long he could stay.

"You mind telling me," I said, "what in all the worlds is going on?"

"Sure," said Jimmy, grinning. He had too many teeth, too big. All moving around. Some things, I saw, didn't change. "I've just got time."

"It's simple," Jimmy said. "Started when I struck the security deal with the Thanes. They liked the way I do business. Liked the way I wrangle time even more. So we got talking.

"Upshot is, they hired me. Special temporal consultant. The Thanes, they're sharp, but they're not gods. Just as well. Put the fate of the cosmos in the hands a god, you might as well kiss the stars goodbye. My job? Keep a lookout on the timeline for . . special events.

"I saw this one coming some way back. It goes like this: your landlord serves you notice. You refuse to sign before midnight. You find your way down here. Landlord follows you. Reveals his true nature. Suddenly the Still Point of the Turning World is facing a Fool. Luckily you defeat him. That's what I saw. So I just had to make sure it all happened, just the way I'd seen it."

I rubbed my head. It hurt.

"Hold on," I said. "You saw it? You mean, you had a vision of the future and saw all this?"

"It's what I do."

"But .. then you could have stopped all this happening by just not hiring me. If you hadn't sent me down here, the landlord wouldn't have followed me and the SPTW wouldn't have been put at risk. You would have … changed the future." I felt my face turn hard. "Deliciosa wouldn't have got turned into a zombie!"

Jimmy grinned and shook his head. "And you wouldn't have kissed an angel! You don't know the future like I do. Trust me—this was the only way."

Jimmy clapped his hands together and faced the door. His outline was beginning to shimmer. I suddenly realized how much effort it was taking for him to stay static in time. Looked like he couldn't keep it up much longer.

"Now," said Jimmy, "I get my reward."

"Reward?" I said. "You mean .. you're going in there?"

"Why not? Time travel wears thin. Always moving, never still. Everything comes round—they say that—and it's true. I've seen it, all of it, again and again and again and again. You can't know. First time round it's fun, after that it's all repeats. Time's a carousel. Doesn't matter which bright horse you ride, you still come round to where you started. Time comes you want to get off but the carousel, she never stops. So you look for the one place you can rest. The center pole. The axle. The still point. And when the door opens that'll take you across, you don't hesitate."

"You saw this too?" I said.

"This most of all," said Jimmy. He reached around the open door, pulled out the key and tossed it to me. "You'll be needing this."

I caught it. I turned it over in wonder.

"You gave me this key, Jimmy, when you sold me the business. Did you know what it was, all those years ago? Did you know what was going to happen, even then?"

"Gotta go," said Jimmy. He let the light gather him up. "You coming?"

I gulped. Behind me, the behemoth gulped too, because Jimmy was talking to both of us.

"Gotta hurry." said Jimmy. "Door closes in thirty seconds. I know. I've seen it."

With that, he stepped over the threshold and was gone.

I stood, took a step forward. I wanted the silence to swallow me up. I felt water lapping at my feet and realized the behemoth was sobbing too.

We both waited.

Thirty seconds later, the door in the behemoth's cheek swung itself shut.

"Two questions," said the behemoth.

I was sitting on the smallest of the behemoth's lower lips, watching the labyrinth floor gradually soak up the lake of tears. The behemoth's tongues had accepted me at last, one was draped across my lap, purring like an Egyptian cat.

"Fire away," I said.

"What did the Fool see in that little Peeping Tom-thing of yours? What made him so curious?"

"Simple. I showed him his own workings. Everyone knows Fools are about as friendly with mirrors as vampires. He'd never seen himself before. So, being a Fool, he couldn't resist finding out what made himself tick."

"Neat trick."

"Second question?"

"Why didn't you follow Jimmy through the door?"

"That's easy." I held up the parchment I'd snatched from the landlord's chopstick fingers just before the wooden wonder got scrunched into a singularity. "I've got a business to run."

I poured myself a coffee.

Outside the office, it was raining. It always is. From far down the street I heard footsteps. A dame in stilettos, walking fast. Mid-thirties, probably human, probably sleek. You can tell a lot from the way a dame walks. Trust me, I know.

I'm a private investigator. Those who need to know my name. The taxman's breathing down my neck and there's a hole in the shoe on my left foot. The glass on my office door is cracked and there's too many stains on the carpet. One's in the shape of a werewolf—but that's another story. I'm nearly out of coffee. If I was a boxer you'd be counting me out.

It gets worse. I live in a city run by too many gods. There's bad times ahead and an appalling stink of guano. There's some say the Fools are on the move. Down at the docks, there's boats coming in piled high with fruit from lands that don't appear on any map. The boats are alive. You pick up the fruit, there's spiders underneath. Big spiders like night, with legs like switchblades. There's speaking holes tearing up the ground and quicksilver storm clouds lacing up the sky. There's bookies'll give you good odds it's Ragnarok just as many will sell you a stake in Armageddon. Chances are it'll be much worse.

Me, I'm just trying to make a living.

Sometimes it feels like everything's spinning out of control, you know? When things get really bad, I look in my drawer at the parchment I keep there. Owning that parchment reminds me that this little office is my one still point in a cosmos going slowly mad. It's not much, but most days it's enough.

Sometimes, when I'm feeling sappy, I wonder what Jimmy's up to, and if he's at rest. Then I wonder if I'll ever see Deliciosa again, and if I'll recognize her when I do.

Other times I just wonder what the behemoth had for lunch.

The rain was still coming down. I tipped my chair back, put my feet up on the desk, and waited for the dame in stilettos to walk through the door. ❧

"Time's a carousel. Doesn't matter which bright horse you ride, you still come round to where you started."

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HOPE SPRINGS INFERNAL

Artist—and now novelist—Wayne Barlowe has an illuminating discussion with a true expert on his work: HIMSELF!

...s easel, just as it's done since he was a kid. It focuses h... from the ...

...LOWE: (Looking away from the easel, where he is painting a ... fiery image of demons in battle) You're worrying about screwing this up, aren't you.

...Well, yes, actually I am. I've known you ...

...LOWE: You'll do fine.

...Thanks. (I shift in my seat) So, you're a novelist now, eh? Let's talk about God's armor.

...LOWE: Ha, yeah, surprises even me.

Where should we start?

Tell me about it, about what it was like to create it.

might make a good book."

MALONE: The paintings were

WDB:

WDB: Well, that would be kind of religious
JARLOWE: (Looking slightly uncomfo
sits at Hell' it

WDB:

WDB: Yeah, easy.

Complete.
WDB:

WDB: Sounds almost alchemical, the way you describe it.
JARLOWE: You know, I'd like that comparison, didn't you?
WDB: (Laughs) I guessed. Can you give me an example?
JARLOWE: (He swishes his brush in the water, wipes it dry, and places it on the water bowl) Well, take for example the

of the demons' faces in my painting. Couple that with horror that th have burned away in the f then add the idea these little pieces o and you have a pretty cool concept for a means of showing these otherworldly creatures emoting. Kind of clockwork

WDB: Interesting, so, tell me a little about the historical influences that you draw upon.
JARLOWE: That's easy, just look around

into the woods

my mind for the structure of the infernal armies. The battles in *God's Demon* are a very important component of the story. Some were modeled after Roman encounters.

flying troops added a lot of that, as did some of the indigenous creatures and mollified and militarized souls.

WDS: What about the infernal court and its workings?

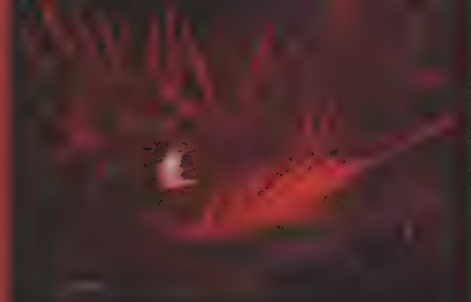
tics and the like intrigue me on a rather

politics of Hell resembles that period. I

and his turbulent times, in fact, I made

from uniforms from that time when I tainted many of the demons.

WDS: Yeah, big breastplates, thigh-boots, rounded helmets, I can see that. I also see other cultural influences at work, others



Carthaginian, I think. Are those reflected in the novel?

[illegible] In one way or another. My over

doesn't discriminate. Souls that are there come from everywhere, as do the fallen

the demons. It's only natural, then, that those influences would be reflected in the architecture and look of the demons.

WDS: What about the souls? Are they visu

[illegible] No—not at all. They differ only

been twisted by the demons. Which is to s[illegible] are, no two look alike.

WDS: Let's talk a little about Hell itself. Did

biology is reflected in how you envisioned the infernal world?

[illegible] Absolutely. I really enjoyed bending the rules of nature to make Hell

not one set on another planet. I saw it as a

HELL DOESN'T DISCRIMINATE. SOULS THAT ARE THERE COME FROM EVERYWHERE, AS DO THE FALLEN GODS THAT MAKE UP A PART OF THE HIERARCHY.

very kinetic place, alive and chaotic.

upheavals. And the creatures that lived there before the Fall are very much part of that environment. I've always loved deep-sea fish and I felt there were great design elements that could be borrowed from

while I was writing.

WDB:

do you feel about *God's Demon*?

ing. I'm actually quite proud of it.

WDB:

reminiscent of glyphs as if to imply a dark mystical quality to their being. The same

The clouds and the textures found in the landscape. To me this drew them all together, implying a common language of creation. It's subtle but there, serving as an underpinning.

WDB: We were at a party together and I overheard you say that there were things about the creation of *God's Demon* that you found odd. Care to elaborate?

DARROWS: (Darrowe purses his lips and

internal glow. I find it unsettling.

and *www.godsdemon.com*.

HOT WATER

LORD YAMADA PAYS A LONG OVERDUE VISIT TO REHAB, ONLY TO FIND THAT EVEN WITHOUT HIS SAKÉ CASK, HE'S STILL SEEING DEMONS

By Richard Parks
Illustration by Tiffany Prothero

The first thing I did upon waking was reach for my saké cask. It wasn't there. Kenji was.

"Good morning, Lord Yamada."

The second thing I did was reach for my sword. It wasn't there, either. Kenji the reprobate priest kept out of reach by the doorway as I struggled to make my eyes focus. Once my surroundings were more than a blur, I realized that I wasn't in my rooms at the Widow Tamahara's establishment. If anything, these quarters were even more spare, though, I had to admit, cleaner.

"Kenji-san, what is the meaning of this?"

"You've been kidnapped on Prince Kanemore's orders. For your own good, of course."

My friends sometimes had a strange way of showing their affection. I groaned and sat up. "Where am I?"

"At a small temple west of the capital, where you will remain for a minimum of one week. I have been so instructed by His Highness."

"Is this some sort of joke?"

He grinned, rubbing the graying fringe around his head. His tonsure was badly in need of a shave. "Well, I find the situation extremely amusing. It might help the time pass for you to do the same. Prince Kanemore, I can assure you, is as serious as a winter storm."

"I haven't been drinking that much."

"Of course not. That is why we were able to haul you bodily out of your bed, carry you for two days in a litter, then deposit your pitiful carcass in the guest quarters of this good temple, and not wake you even once. Tell this to someone who doesn't know you. And by the way, for your next call of nature, please be so good as to deal with it yourself. I'm done."

I took a sniff of my clothes and bedding which were, much to my astonishment, clean. "This really isn't necessary."

"Prince Kanemore disagrees. Currently, his opinion is the one that matters."

Kenji handed me a letter. I broke the seal and read:

"My sister would be very angry with me if I let you die for her sake. Especially since we both have work yet to do. For now you will rest and recover. That is both a command and a request from a friend. —Kanemore"

My failure to save Princess Teiko would haunt me to the end of my days, but drinking myself to death had never been my plan. I resolved to tell Prince Kanemore that as soon as I returned to the capital. "I'm leaving. Please don't try to stop me."

Kenji smiled. "Why should I do so?"

I frowned. "You mean you weren't sent to ensure my cooperation?"

"No, I was sent to explain the situation to the abbot of this temple and present a gift to him from Prince Kanemore. The bushi that Prince Kanemore has stationed at all the exits to the temple compound, on the other hand, were sent to ensure your cooperation."

"Oh."

Kanemore was like his late sister at least in that regard—when it came to strategy, he was meticulous. "What am I to do here?"

"Nothing but rest. No ghost finding, no demon quelling, and especially no drinking." Kenji said. "Which actually is the part of this arrangement I find most disagreeable. If you cannot drink, neither can I. There is no saké at this temple. I can assure you. I've looked."

"No doubt you were looking for women as well."

"None of those, either," he said sadly. "Not so much as an elderly nun. So. Are you hungry?" he asked.

"Not in the least."

"Too bad, because breakfast has been prepared. Millet and pickles. For all meals. For the next week."

No rice and seven days of enforced sobriety in the company of Kenji? I groaned again. Forget this "for my own good" nonsense—I was being punished.

Other than the matter of not being allowed to leave, I was pretty much abandoned to my own devices after Kenji and I paid our respects to the chief priest of the temple. Despite a pounding pain in my head, I managed to keep my breakfast down and then stirred myself enough to have a look around the confines of my prison.

Like many mountain temples, it was a compound consisting of the main meditation hall and barracks for the monks, as well as a kiln, a forge, and storage buildings for the grain and other offerings that came into the temple as both gifts and payment for funerals and other spiritual services the temple provided for the people of the surrounding area. With these supplies plus the free labor of the monks and lay brothers, such places tended to exist fairly comfortably.

There was a walled and gated section on the northern slope of the compound that I could not immediately identify, beyond which I saw wisps of steam and heard rushing water. I had a suspicion, which Kenji later confirmed when he collected me later that afternoon. He was carrying two spare sets of robes.

"Come with me, Lord Yamada."

"I'm not taking the tonsure, if that's what you had in mind," I said as I rubbed my aching temples. "Being sober is bad enough."

He laughed. "Clearly, you do not realize where you are. Come with me, and we might find a remedy for your pain."

Kenji led me to the very walled and gated section that I had noted before. He spoke a word to the young monk minding the gate, and we were ushered through. I immediately noted two rather large stone bathing troughs and, beyond those, steam rising from the slope of the mountain where what I now realized was a waterfall tumbled down into a large pool.

"A hot spring?"

"One of the finest in the district, Lord Yamada. Noted far and wide for its cleansing and curative powers."

"If that's the case, why are we the only ones here?"

"I would guess because it's rather early in the season for the nobles to be traveling," Kenji said, though, as I'd apparently planted the thought in his head, he did look a little puzzled. "Still, I'm more inclined to enjoy a good, hot soak than question my luck. Shall we?"

It had been a long time since I'd visited a hot spring of any sort, so I needed little persuasion. We stripped down and rinsed ourselves in preparation. As we were doing so, the young monk who had been watching the gate approached us hesitantly. I guessed his age at no more than twenty. He had a good, strong face that didn't seem to go with his current nervousness.

"Yes, Hoshi? What is it?" Kenji asked.

"Masters, I felt it my duty to urge caution to you both. There have been some... problems, at the spring."

"What sort of problems?" I asked.

"Sudden rises in the water temperature," Hoshi said. "It's only started happening recently, and so far no one's been injured, but I still advise caution."

We thanked Hoshi for his concern, and he bowed and returned to his post. "Probably some fire spirit having a bit of fun," I said.

"Be serious," Kenji said. "In the middle of this holy temple? Such a one would have been driven out ages ago. And even if such a creature appeared, I would exorcise the silly thing faster than it could call its mother."

I had to give Kenji credit: he was fiercely loyal to the Buddhist creed, even if he rarely followed it to the letter. In his worldview, such unenlightened creatures as gods and spirits were simply beneath notice. I know most people who followed the old Way of the Gods had long since reached accommodation with the more recent Buddhist teachings and often it was difficult to tell where one set of precepts ended and the other began. Yet not everyone had done so and certainly not Kenji. He remained a purist to the core of his lecherous, hard-drinking being. I draped the spare robe over my arm and bowed to the priest.

"Lead on."

The main soaking pool was nestled up against the mountain. It was a naturally formed stone basin at the foot of the waterfall, from there the heated water flowed out through a channel to run in steaming rivulets down the side of the mountain. Niches had been cut into the rock for the bathers, and we gingerly lowered ourselves into the water.

The water was perfect—hot but not scalding. There was a faint hint of sulphur but not enough to affect the breath. The heat began to ease away aches I had not realized were present, though my headache, if anything, felt worse. I remarked on this to Kenji.

"That's just the poison being drawn from your body. You'll feel better soon ... maybe a day or so. You have a lot of impurities, Lord Yamada."

"Said the pot to the kettle."

I couldn't work up much beyond mild annoyance at Kenji, the bath felt too good. I wasn't exactly grateful to either him or Prince Kanemore, but the prospect of more hot soaks over the coming days made my confinement seem something less than an ordeal. I settled back against the stone, down into the water until it covered everything except my nose and eyes. I was about to close my eyes when movement caught my attention. I looked up.

She was standing on a stone ledge at the top of the waterfall, about a bowshot up the mountainside. From that distance it was impossible to tell her age, though my impression was that of a young girl, perhaps twelve, wearing a plain brown kimono and hakama. Her hair was unconfined and flowed over her shoulders like a black waterfall. I sat up.

"I thought you said there were no Kenji, move!"

I grabbed Kenji's arm and yanked him upright, and we half-climbed, half-fell out of the pool and onto the hard stones around its edge. Not an instant too soon. In another moment we both heard the roar and felt the crash as a huge fall of boiling water slammed down the mountainside. We scrabbled to get away from the edge of the pool but even so felt the sting of the scalding spray. Kenji's backside was covered with red blotches, and I had the feeling I had fared no better. In another moment the excess water had flowed over the side of the pool and down the mountain, and except for the still-steaming water soaking the stones surrounding the basin, it was impossible to tell that anything unusual had happened.

Kenji threw one of the spare robes at me and wrapped himself in the other as Hoshi came sprinting through the gate. "Masters, what happened?"

"I'm not sure. Kenji, I thought you said there were no women here."

"There aren't," he said, looking puzzled.

"The nuns are all on pilgrimage to Enrakyu-ji," Hoshi confirmed. "Along with a substantial number of my brother monks. We have no others guests at the moment, man or woman. Did you see something?"

I noticed that his glance, as did mine, strayed up to the top of the waterfall, now empty except for the steady stream of hot water that had doubtless been falling no differently for hundreds of years. "I thought I did," I said.

"Nevertheless," Kenji said, "if you hadn't pulled us out of there when you did, we'd have been boiled alive."

That much was certain. Perhaps my eyes were deceiving me when I saw the girl; if she'd been standing where I thought when the mountain stream boiled over, she'd have been scalded even as she was pushed to her death, but there was no sign of her, either in the pool or the near slope. Even so, my eyes were telling the truth when I saw the waterfall erupt. I carefully pulled the robe around my stinging flesh.

"I think I'll forego the hot spring for the rest of my stay," I said.

Soon after our arrival we had paid our respects to the hojo of the temple, and that was the first and last time I'd expected to see the old man. No such luck. The next morning Kenji and I were summoned to an audience.

SHE WAS STANDING ON A STONE LEDGE AT THE TOP OF THE WATERFALL, ABOUT A BOWSHOT UP THE MOUNTAINSIDE.

Master Kagyo looked even sourer than what I had assumed to be his usual demeanor. When Kenji and I bowed our respects, he in turn bowed to us. "I've learned of your difficulties the previous evening, and must express my regret."

"I gather this is not the first time this has occurred?"

He sighed. "I have spoken to Hoshi, who I gather did express some concern? Well, it's true, though never before has there been an incident this serious. Prince Kanemore is a patron of this temple, if either of you had died, I could never have apologized adequately."

Meaning he might have lost a not inconsiderable income. While his concern wasn't exactly touching, I did see his dilemma. "The hot springs of this temple are a source of both pride and offerings," I said. "You cannot afford to lose either."

"Just so," he said. "Lord Yamada, I must ask—what did you see before the water fell?"

I told him. I had a strong feeling that he already knew. "I cannot be certain of any of this; it happened rather quickly."

He waved a hand. "Lord Yamada, you're not the first to see the creature. At first I thought it mere coincidence, that some peasant girl had found her way across the mountain, lured by the spring. Now I am certain we are dealing with something more sinister."

"A demon?" Kenji asked.

The old man grunted. "More than likely. Gentlemen, both your reputations precede you, and I must request your assistance. It is imperative that we rid ourselves of this creature. Otherwise this holy temple may not survive."

"I know a sutra that will confine it and render it powerless, but I can't perform the ritual alone," Kenji said. "I'll need seven volunteers, and the training will take no fewer than four days."

"We will provide whatever you need," Master Kagyo said.

"Including a sword?" I asked. "A demon cannot be exorcised like a spirit. It can only be bound and slain."

"Swords are often given to the temple as offerings," Master Kagyo said. "We have several, and all are blessed objects. With your aid, the creature's destruction is assured."

I grunted, but otherwise kept silent. Nothing was assured. Not in this life.

For the next three days Kenji was kept busy with a group of young and earnest monks who literally gathered at his feet as he instructed them in memorizing the holy sutra they would be using for the rite. To my considerable surprise, Kenji was quite a good teacher. He remained both firm and focused, refraining from telling even one bawdy joke though, in my opinion, the gang of them could have used a good joke. I left them to it.

As for myself, I had long since finished inspecting the sword that Master Kagyo had supplied. It was a straight-bladed tachi of the old Chinese pattern, a type often used for just such offerings. Though the sword had never been intended for actual combat, it had been made by a master who took no shortcuts nor made any concessions to the blade's intended purpose. All I needed to do was polish the blade a bit to bring back its razor edge, and that was the work of an afternoon. Afterward, I was at loose ends. A combination of boredom and curiosity drew me back to the hot spring.

The gate to the spring was unbarred and unwatched. I wasn't terribly surprised, since after the last incident it seemed unlikely that anyone would be foolish enough to use the baths. I pulled the gate open and went inside.

Everything was more or less as I remembered. The steaming waterfall fell with the same muted rushing sound that it had no doubt made for the last several centuries. The stone pool made ripples back and forth from the ebb and flow of the water before it flowed over the sluice and down the mountainside as it cooled and turned

into a gurgling mountain stream. It was easy to forget what had happened before, but I still remembered the face looking down at me from the head of the waterfall. Perhaps it was simple foolishness, but I wanted a closer look

I found the path up the mountain on the right side of the waterfall. It was steep and faintly marked but clear enough; I knew I was not the first to use it. I wondered who else had taken this way recently. It seemed a rather risky avenue to explore, if Master Kagyo was correct about the demon. As for myself, I had no excuse save curiosity.

That, and the strong suspicion that whatever we were dealing with here was not a demon at all

That conviction was put to the test almost immediately. I was barely halfway to the head of the waterfall when the girl appeared again, looking down at me. I eyed the rushing hot water no more than the length of a body away and had no doubt that it could expand to engulf me in an instant, as it had nearly overwhelmed me and Kenji three days before. I considered again how foolish this enterprise was and how easily it could be the end of me

I looked at the girl. I couldn't help thinking of her as such: the hair, the size of her. Her eyes, like two black stone pebbles. There was nothing about her save an aura of .. well, strangeness, to make one think she was other than what she appeared—a pretty but slightly unkempt young girl.

I had seen more than a few demons in my time, and some of them even looked as angry as this creature did now, but there was something in their faces that was missing here- malevolence. She was angry—that was unmistakable—but evil? I just did not see it in her. While I did not consider the fact that I had not so far been knocked off the mountain by a cascade of boiling water to smash on the rocks below as proof of anything, I did take it as a good sign. I kept climbing.

After a moment the girl stepped away from the edge of the waterfall and disappeared. When I finally reached the stone ledge where the waterfall originated, she was nowhere to be seen. As for the waterfall origin, it was a flow of scalding water emerging from a fissure in the mountainside, only its normal flow into the air and down in the waterfall cooled it enough for the baths. The mountain itself continued for a considerable height beyond it. The path continued as well, but its direction was no longer up; it pointed down on a slant across the slope to the other side of the mountain. I saw a footprint there and paused to examine it.

Curious.

I followed the path. The way was steep, but not nearly so much as the first section that went nearly straight up the mountain slope. To my right I could see the valley beyond the mountain. When I looked back behind, I could just make out the road that Kenji and Kanemore's bushi must have used to bring me to the temple in the first place. Before long the descending path entered a growth of maples and green pine, and everything was lost to sight except the path itself and the mountain above me. For a while I merely listened to the call of birds in the mountain forest and smelled the fragrance of the trees and earth.

The path ended in a grove of very large old pines near the mountain's base. It occurred to me that doubtless here was an exit to my gentle confinement, as it was unlikely anyone thought to guard this path, neither Kenji nor Kanemore's men could have known about it. When I saw what was waiting in the grove, all thoughts of the outside road went by the wayside.

The shrine had once been a large, proud thing but had become timeworn and neglected. Roof tiles had fallen off and not been replaced; one of the beams supporting the entranceway was canted at an odd angle, and the overhang sagged slightly. Likely in a dozen or so more years the entire structure would fall to ruin. In truth, there was only one new thing anywhere near the shrine. It was a folded piece of paper tied to an old maple that I recognized as a prayer-tree. The remnants of older prayers remained in the bits of rotting cord that had once tied them to the tree.

It wasn't exactly proper, but I unfolded the prayer and read it. Then I sighed and turned toward the shrine. "You can come out now, Hoshi-kun. The only way back is up the same path, and I know you didn't pass me."

After a moment or two Hoshi appeared at the door to the shrine on his hands and knees, looking chagrined. "How did you know?"

"I knew someone had made a fresh footprint on the path. I didn't know who until I was so impertinent as to read the prayer you left at this shrine. A prayer to the kami of this mountain. A rather improper sort of prayer for a novice monk."

Hoshi threw himself on his face. "You're not going to tell Master Kagyo, are you?"

"Tell him what? That your loyalties are divided between the Way of the Gods and the Way of the Buddha?"

He looked up at me. "They are not divided!" I just . I was trying to help. I thought I might be able to calm her."

"Why should you care if the demon is killed?"

"She's not—" he stopped himself, but I was already smiling.

"Indeed. It's not a demon who turned the spring into a torrent—it's the spirit of this mountain. A kami. Once I discovered the shrine I assumed as much myself, but you already knew all about it, didn't you?"

He nodded, looking unhappy.

"Why is she angry?"

"Because I abandoned her," Hoshi said.

I sighed. "You do realize that you're going to have to explain that, don't you? Either you tell the story to me or Master Kagyo. Despite the fact that I haven't had any saké in nearly five days, I can assure you that I am in a far better mood than he is."

Hoshi kneeled on the portico to the shrine and glanced around him. "Lord Yamada, what you see here is the sad remnant of my family's history. For generations, we were the caretakers of this shrine to the goddess of the mountain."

"What happened?"

"The Emperor's taxes," Hoshi said bitterly. "Most of the smaller farmers in the area sold their land to the local daimyo rather than paying and then worked their old farms for him as tenants. When that happened, the offerings that were going to our shrine instead went to the temple across the mountain. That was the daimyo's will."

Hoshi was not telling me anything I had not heard before; an ill-considered land reform edict in an earlier century had many consequences that had not been intended. The consolidation of land and thus power in the regional lords' hands had been merely one of them. That this regional lord was primarily a follower of the Buddha and not the older Way of the Gods was simple misfortune for the shrine. "That must have been difficult."

Hoshi sighed. "Enough people remained loyal that my family managed to carry on for a time, but there came the day when only I and my grandmother remained to serve the kami. Then only I remained."

"I gather you could not carry on alone."

Hoshi let out a long, slow breath. "I intended to do so," he said. "Somehow. But, even in my family, funerals are the business of a temple, not a shrine. When my grandmother died, I visited the temple across the mountain to make the necessary arrangements. I admit it—I was curious about these men who had no care for ritual impunity, who saw that my poor grandmother's remains were treated properly. I found myself talking to them and listening. This spring, I abandoned the shrine forever to make my life here. That is why the kami is so angry. It's my fault."

"It's also why you made a point of warning us, that day at the bath, when no one else had seen fit to do so. You knew what might happen."

"I feared, Lord Yamada. I did not want to be right."

"So. What are you going to do?"

He blinked. "I don't understand."

"You do realize that matters cannot continue as they are? There's no balance in this spiritual war, Hoshi. As things are, someone is going to lose."

"But . . what can I do? I can't go back to the shrine, not now. I've been offering prayers, but they are hollow and she knows this, so they have not helped. A god may be powerful and revered, but it is just a god, unenlightened as I or any other mortal, just as trapped on the wheel of death and rebirth. I have found the true path."

"You sound like someone I know," I said, thinking of Kenji. "Yet even assuming that is true, and I am no priest or scholar to make such a judgment, it does not change the situation. Tomorrow my friend Kenji and his associates are going to use a demon-binding ritual to trap the spirit of the mountain."

"She's not a demon! She's a goddess!"

"So far as Kenji is concerned, there's precious little difference. If Kenji prevails, the spirit of the mountain will be bound long enough for me to strike with the blessed sword I have been provided."

"You wouldn't . ."

"I assure you, that I would. Reluctantly, but with no hesitation. Yet if the goddess prevails, she may very well pull the mountain itself down on the temple, and there's an end to both." He looked at me in absolute horror, but I did not relent. "Whatever happens tomorrow, Hoshi-kun, you are responsible. You don't need me to tell you that."

"But I ... what else can I do? Even 'nothing' is not an option," Hoshi said. "I volunteered to participate in the rite of binding itself."

"Why would you do that?"

"Since so many of my brother monks are on pilgrimage, Master Kenji had trouble getting enough men for the ritual. Master Kagyo knows my background; he is still suspicious of me," Hoshi said bitterly. "I thought if I could go through with the rite, it would prove my commitment to this temple."

I thought of the simple prayer, tied to an old tree. "To whom? Master Kagyo or yourself?"

"Both," he said simply.

"So now you've made your betrayal of the goddess a double one," I said.

Hoshi flushed in anger. "What else could I do?"

"I state the facts, Hoshi-kun. I don't presume to judge you. You are in a difficult position," I said. "If I had an answer, I'd give it."

"There is no answer. I cannot both serve a goddess and follow the Eightfold Path!"

"Maybe you should consider telling her that. Or do you think the spirit that your family revered for generations is unworthy of an explanation?"

There was an open path down the mountain from the shrine, but at this point I didn't even consider it. I followed the path back across the mountain and left Hoshi kneeling in the ruins of his family's legacy.

On the following morning, Kenji and his assistant monks faced the mountain like an army besieging a fortress. The first tremors began before the echo of the first dronning chant had faded. From then on they only got worse.

Master Kagyo and I stood a little to the side of the battle line. He sat in silence, his large wooden prayer beads held in one hand, palm open and hand upright in blessing. I kept my own hand on the hilt of the sacred sword. After a little while I glanced at Kenji.

There was a fierceness about the priest that I had seen only seldom, when the fervor for his spiritual path was either being challenged or affirmed. He was in his element now, perhaps even more so than when engaged in one of his more common pursuits like securing a bottle of wine or the attentions of a pretty woman.

Hoshi, on the other hand, was a mess. Oh, he bore his weight, so to speak, in the repetition of the chant. He and his seven brother monks and novices, with Kenji making the eighth member of the line, were in perfect unison, you could almost see their words battering away at the mountain like flung stones. Yet Hoshi trembled as he spoke, and when the first answer came from the mountain, a glowing hot rock that hissed as it struck the water of the bath, there were tears in his eyes.

The goddess of the mountain was losing. That was clear much sooner than I expected; there was rumbling, yes, but now the earlier violent tremors were beginning to fade even as the drone of Kenji's binding sutra rose and strengthened. If there had ever been a time for the goddess to pull the mountain down, it had long passed. I did not believe her capable now, the long years of neglect, perhaps even the presence of the temple, all had taken their toll. I had seen her as a girl that day on the mountain. I wondered if she had always appeared thus. I no longer wondered about the outcome; that was no longer in doubt.

I considered what was to come. Perhaps I would be cursed. It was no minor thing to slay a goddess. Even perhaps if there was no alternative. I drew the sword and prepared myself. It was only because I was examining the blade again that I did not see what happened in the next instant.

"Hoshi!"

I do not know who shouted. Perhaps it was Master Kagyo, or Kenji, or even both at once. But the harmony of the chant was broken. I looked up to find Hoshi racing desperately up the path to the head of the waterfall. I headed for the base of the path as Kenji shouted approval. "Stop him, Lord Yamada! He'll be killed!"

"Perhaps," I said and blocked the path up the mountain, sword in hand.

The chant ceased utterly, and the goddess finally showed herself. She stood at the head of the waterfall where I had seen her that first day, but she was not the same. She stood in glory, surrounded by a golden glow. She was taller than I remembered, a woman now and not a girl. I wondered if I was seeing what Hoshi's family had seen, what they had revered for centuries, and not the diminished creature she had become. Was it because of Hoshi?

Master Kagyo stormed up, with Kenji barely a step behind. "Lord Yamada, what is the meaning of this? Why did you not go after him?"

"Because the situation was his to resolve. If he thinks he's found a way to do that it's not my place to interfere."

"He'll be boiled alive!" Kenji said. "The demon must be furious!"

"She's not a demon, and yes, I'm sure she is furious. He may yet be killed. Choices have consequences, whether we choose well or poorly. That does not mean we are free from choosing."

Both Master Kagyo and Kenji were glaring at me, Kagyo in anger and Kenji in disbelief, but it was far too late to stop Hoshi from reaching the waterfall, so we all watched as he approached slowly and then kneeled down at the feet of his former goddess.

Master Kagyo scowled. "I knew it! The wretch is bowing to that creature!"

"In respect," I said, knowing it was so. "Which is no less than she deserves. Not in worship."

"I still say she's going to boil him." Kenji said. "Yamada-san, I hope you know what you're doing."

"Hardly, since I'm not doing anything. Hoshi is."

The trembling ceased. There was still great activity above, with steam boiling out of the mountainside, sometimes so thick that we could see neither Hoshi nor the goddess, but only the glow. Moments passed, then several more.

"What is that fool up to?" Master Kagyo demanded, but now Kenji was grinning broadly.

"I think I know." He turned to his assistants, who by now were simply milling about in confusion. "Out with your prayer beads, all of you. Your friend needs your help."

Continued on page 106

SHE STOOD AT THE HEAD OF THE WATERFALL WHERE I HAD SEEN HER THAT FIRST DAY, BUT SHE WAS NOT THE SAME.

THE FIREMEN'S FAIRY

What makes a man a real man?
Is it his courage?
His heart?
His job?
Or his height?

BY SANDRA MCDONALD
ILLUSTRATION BY BRUCE MACPHERSON

GRADUATION DAY. BRIGHT AND SUNNY. THE BREEZE smelled like freshly cut grass. One hundred newly minted firefighters waited anxiously to receive their diplomas from a magnificent golden phoenix. Steven Goodwin shifted his weight from one foot to the other and tried not to stare at the bird's huge wings. The Supreme Mascot of the Massasoit Fire Department was rarely seen, never photographed, and undeniably amazing. She sat serenely at the edge of the graduation stage with Steven's first station assignment clutched in her claws.

"And so on this fine day ..." Assistant Chief Kelly droned on at the podium. Kelly was a short man with steel-gray hair and a paunch that strained his uniform buttons. He'd been speaking for several minutes, but Steven was only half listening. Mostly he was thinking about tough as-nails Engine 157, with its East Side firehouse and fierce dragon mascot. Nobody messed with 157. Or Ladder 28 on Rymere Island, with a steel-corseted Valkyrie riding beside the driver. Valkyries kicked ass.

Kelly continued, "Their courage and strength will be tested in the field under extraordinary circumstances ..."

Beside Steven, Jimmy Linden let out an audible sigh. "We'll be retired before he's finished."

The two of them had grown up together on the same block, had joined the army together, had served in Iraq within twenty miles of each other's units. For the last thirteen weeks they'd been practicing ladder ascensions, rescue training, fire suppression, and emergency medicine. Steven had aced all the physical requirements. Jimmy received the best scores on the written tests. But none of that meant anything until your first big fire, Steven knew. Until you faced down an inferno and lived to tell about it.

"... and so they'll continue in the tradition of brotherhood ..."

Steven shifted his gaze to the audience. His current girlfriend was somewhere in the folding chairs, lost in a sea of blouses and shirts. Steven's father sat right in front, ramrod straight, with the other retired firefighters. Flanking the seats was a line of antique fire engines with gleaming brass and bright red paint. A dozen more modern engines also waited, their crews ready to dash off if needed. Steven could see a three-headed dog wagging its tail eagerly on one truck, and a water nymph filing her fingernails while she leaned against a paramedic unit.

"I present to you the Academy's 150th class of brave, skilled, hard-working probationary firefighters!" Chief Kelly finally said.

Steven barely heard the applause and cheers when his turn came to cross the stage. With clammy palms he shook hands with his teachers, the school administrators, and Chief Kelly. He knew he was blushing and grinning like a fool. Some days, back in the desert, he'd figured to be dead by dusk. Now he was a fireman like his dad, and both his grandfathers, and all the other Goodwin men whose pictures hung in the fire museum gallery.

At the far end of the stage, the phoenix peered down at him with wide, black eyes. He could see himself in those eyes, twin reflections of his black and gold uniform. She lifted her whitish-gray beak and passed a scroll off to Chief Kelly, who pressed it into Steven's hand.

"Good luck, son," Kelly said.

Steven waited until he was off the stage before he unrolled his assignment.

Oh, shit.

Engine Company 14's firehouse was a two-story brick building nestled in a residential neighborhood by the river. The streets were narrow and crowded, lined with wooden triple-decker apartment buildings. The smell of sewage carried on the breeze from a nearby treatment plant. On his first morning of work Steven wedged his battered Honda into the corner of the firehouse parking lot, killed the engine, and sat for a long moment with his hands on the steering wheel.

Finally he hauled himself out of the car and walked into the open equipment bay. The fire engine was an old Firestorm II, dazzlingly red and silver. The watch office was empty but sounds of conversation drifted out of the nearby day room. Captain Ingalls, a large black man with a scarred cheek and short, gray hair, was sitting in his office listening to radio traffic and watching a coffee pot percolate.

"Probie!" Ingalls boomed when he saw him. "Come on in."

Steven went in but didn't sit. The office was only large enough for an old steel desk, two wooden filing cabinets, a leather seat for the captain, and some folding chairs for visitors. Official notices and regulations hung on bulletin boards.

"Sir, I wanted to say that I'm glad—"

"Hold on," Ingalls said, raising his hand. Both of them watched the last bits of coffee drop into a glass pot. Ingalls transferred the liquid to a mug ringed with multiple layers of brown grime.

Steven said, "Looks like that cup needs to be washed, Captain."

"Haven't washed it in twelve years," Ingalls said. "I like the grit."

He took a happy sip, fixed his gaze on Steven, and said, "I heard you weren't thrilled with this assignment."

"I'm fine with it, sir," Steven said. "My father was a little concerned."

"Your father called Chief Kelly. They go way back."

"I asked him not to." Which was true. But he hadn't asked very hard.

"The Superintendent told him what I'm going to tell you, probie. You deal with it. Every mascot in the Fire Department is a highly skilled, highly prized supernatural volunteer. The city works long and hard to recruit them, and we're damned lucky to have ours."

"Sir." Steven squared his shoulders, just like back in the military. "There's no problem."

"Now, I know he can be a little unusual. I know he takes some getting used to. Some people, he just grates on. Or they get hung up on other things. He's had it tough sometimes, from firefighters and other mascots alike. But you won't find a braver little guy anywhere. There's no one I'd rather have watching my back. Got it?"

Steven swallowed some shame. Maybe he was being too hasty to

THE PHOENIX PEERED DOWN AT HIM WITH WIDE,

judge. "I understand, Captain."

Ingalls called over Scooter Watkins, the engineer and second-in command on B-shift. He was a heavy man with a wide mustache and an easy grin.

"Iraq, huh?" he asked, after introductions. "People shoot at you a lot over there?"

"Some," Steven allowed.

Ingalls reached for his appalling coffee mug. "Show him around, Scoot."

The equipment bay floor was spotlessly clean. The upstairs showers leaked, but the tiles had recently been grouted. The beds in the men's bunkroom were made up with green blankets and tight corners. In the basement were some free weights, a dusty treadmill, and a sofa with tattered cushions. Final stop on the tour was the day room, with its kitchen area and large wooden table. Worn leather sofas lined the walls and windows overlooked the river. Pictures of retired and fallen firemen hung on the walls.

"Here's the probie," Scooter announced.

The station's mascot flitted through the air and said, "How handsome! I'm delighted to meet you. Ecstatic! We're going to be such good friends. Would you like to stroke my wings? They're finer than silk!"

Tinkerbob.

Official fairy of Engine 14.

"Calm down, Bob," Scooter said. "Let the kid sit down for a moment."

Bob twirled and threw little bits of glitter into the air. He was no more than three inches tall and had rainbow-colored wings. His legs were encased in pink tights and glittery ballet slippers. He had curly brown hair and wore a cap with bells on it.

"They didn't tell me you were so dashing," Bob said as he zipped around Steven's head. "I have a thing for men in uniform. And ladies, too! Miss Paula is exceptionally beautiful."

"Bob, sit," Paula Little said from her place at the kitchen table. She was the third member of B-shift. Steven knew her only by reputation. A few years earlier, during her first week on the job, she and two other firefighters had been knocking down a fire on the second floor of a burning brownstone. An air conditioning unit dropped through the roof and smashed the floors out from underneath them. It was Tinkerbob who'd found the victims under the rubble and led the rescue that saved Paula, though not the other two. Paula's left cheek and lower jaw were still thick with red burns. Steven pretended not to notice.

"Hope you like our little fellow," Scooter said, with a head jerk toward Bob. "We're mighty fond of him out here."

Bob darted in and kissed Steven's cheek. "We're going to be best friends."

The kiss felt like the bite of a fly. Steven said, "I'm sure we will."

He hadn't survived the army by being stupid, after all. If the members of B-shift didn't give him positive reviews at the end of his pro-

baton, he'd never make it to full-fledged firefighter Bob's recommendation would count as much as anyone else's As lowest in the pecking order, Steven would have to do most of the grunt work around the station—cooking, cleaning, swabbing down the bathrooms, folding and refolding hoses, polishing boots. Surely he could do all that, and prove himself a good firefighter, and still be friendly toward the annoying little guy.

"Best friends, best friends, best friends!" Bob came to rest on Steven's forearm. "My dearest, will you fix me a bath? Warm water, some honey, and a bit of vanilla oil in a tea cup But not too hot I have very delicate skin, you know—"

The dispatch tones went off and the intercom clicked to life

"Engine 14, report of smoke, one two four Durello Street "

"Report of smoke!" Bob zoomed toward the equipment bay. "Let's

bare hands, though. Most of the time, he sits around hammering silver What's your mascot do?"

Bob spent most of his time gossiping, reading celebrity magazines over Paula's shoulder, and playing dress-up with a bunch of other fairies who lived in a nearby oak tree The fairy men enjoyed draping themselves in colored tin foil, or scraps of pink velvet, or the little tiny firefighter costumes the district chief's wife had made for them. Sometimes they pretended to fight fires in the station locker room Scooter would issue them mint floss to use as a fire hose. Captain Ingalls would reward them with candy corn for a job well done

"Thank you, sir!" the fairy men would salute

The absolutely worst thing about Bob was his whistling. Cheerful little whistles, day and night, in the kitchen and bunkroom and equipment bay, except when Captain Ingalls asked him to pipe

BLACK EYES. HE COULD SEE HIMSELF IN THOSE EYES...

go get 'em!"

Paula said, "Here, probie," and thrust a heavy turnout coat into his hands She pulled on her own coat and swung up to the jump seat behind Captain Ingalls. "You sit over there."

Steven climbed up behind Scooter and tugged his coat on as the engine rolled forward. A real call, his first real call He could sense the curious and envious glares of motorists as Scooter maneuvered the engine through traffic Men on their way to office buildings, men on their way to crummy jobs Not him. Never him

Four minutes after leaving the firehouse, they reached a boarded-up grammar school of crumbling brick and broken windows It might have been a grand building once, but graffiti marred most of its walls and the playground of rusting equipment was littered with drug debris, excrement, and mounds of trash A police car was parked on the sidewalk

"Homeless get in there, try to cook up junk or their dinner," the cop said. "Going to burn the whole place down one day."

Steven couldn't smell smoke The air was visibly clear, or as clear as city air could be But he followed Paula dutifully across the playground to a side door that hung loose on its hinges They found no people inside but plenty of evidence of squatters—soiled sheets, candle stubs, a tattered brown teddy bear The classrooms were dim and ghostly in the boarded-up light. The blackboards had all been shattered

"Nothing here." Paula reported over the radio She gave Steven a bright-eyed look "Little disappointing, huh?"

He shrugged

The rest of the day was no more exciting. In fact, Steven's whole first week unfolded in a similarly dull way Milk runs and cakewalks A few car accidents, some building inspections, a diabetic who'd collapsed in a Chinese supermarket Jimmy, who'd been posted over to Engine 129, at least got some action on a fire in an Italian restaurant

"Whole kitchen went up," he said. "All that grease, you know?"

They met to shoot pool at a fireman's bar called The Hose The floors were old and scuffed, the booths made of ripped red vinyl, but the pool tables were in good condition Pictures of equipment and mascots hung on the nicotine-stained walls The city had recently outlawed indoor smoking in restaurants and bars, but The Hose was owned by a retired battalion chief and Jimmy was puffing on a noxious-smelling cigar.

"Can you believe it," Jimmy said as he lined up the cue ball. "Six medical assists, two car accidents, and a woman too fat to get out her front door That was the entire shift yesterday. But it's better than getting shot at in Baghdad."

Steven swallowed some beer. "I guess

Jimmy gave him a mischievous look. "Still. At least we've got a dwarf "

"Shut up "

"Mogol doesn't say much Good at ripping car doors off with his

down Station 42 had a goblin infamous for singing bawdy ballads, and Ladder 12's minotaur had written a country music hit, but Bob simply whistled and whistled and whistled

"Why don't you think up some songs, instead?" Paula asked one night while Steven dried the dinner dishes. "With a melody and lyrics "

Bob draped himself over the back of a sofa. "I'm not good at lyrics. It's my one tragic failing "

Steven said, "I'm sure you have others."

Paula gave him a warning look.

"My dearest Steven." Bob darted in for a quick kiss on the cheek "Will you pour me some almond milk? And sprinkle cinnamon on top?"

A month after Steven joined Engine 14, the shift got their first three-tone It was two AM and he'd been dreaming of being lost under a hot yellow sky Over the intercom, the dispatcher said, "Engine 14, Ladder 2, Rescue 8. One-four-five Losco Street " Steven was up out of bed before the announcement finished, and stumbled to the engine with a dry mouth

"You ready for this?" Paula asked as the engine raced through the dark streets.

"Born ready!" Steven shouted back, and caught the smell of smoke in the air

Two minutes after leaving the firehouse, they screeched to a halt outside a burning Victorian house They were the first unit on the scene. Thick, gray smoke boiled toward the full moon and red flames shot out of the blown-out windows. Neighbors in pajamas and bathrobes had come out to watch the spectacle. Some took pictures with their cell phones, while others smoked or chatted. Three kids and a man stood at the curb, in obvious distress

"My wife!" the man yelled "I think she's still inside!"

Captain Ingalls turned to Bob "Go find her "

"Yes, sir!" Bob zipped toward the inferno.

Steven tried not to admire Bob's bravado His own courage was turning into wobbly knees. Fire training at the academy had been under intimidating but controlled circumstances The chances of getting injured or killed had been real, but minimized. Here the hot air was roiling with ash, and the roof might collapse at any moment, and Paula was yelling at him to follow her up onto the porch, hold the line, keep it aimed

He had his mask on, the heavy rubber and plastic feeding him clean air But the acrid smells of burning carpet and paint made his nose and throat itch. Heat rolling out of the house baked through his turnout coat and gloves The most vivid thing about Iraq hadn't been the filth, or the desperation, or even the deaths Instead it was the relentless summer heat baking through his uniform and frying him from the inside out

Bob darted out of the smoke, passed Steven's helmet, and flew directly to the curb to report back to Captain Ingalls No urgent order came to rescue the trapped woman. Already dead, then Paula tugged

Steven toward the front door. They crouched low and shot pulses of cold water at the ceiling in the front room. Drenching fires directly was ineffective, old-fashioned. Better that the heat convert the water to cooling mist. Soon Ladder 2 and Rescue 8 arrived, and their combined efforts knocked the fire out. Steven felt thrilled at surviving his first fire, then went outside and saw the children weeping for their mother.

"How'd you do, probie?" asked one of the men from Rescue 8 while Steven and Paula folded up their hose.

Bob made a quick dizzying circle around Steven's head. "He did excellent! Very brave. Very manly. But I singed my tights. See? They're all dirty."

Ladder 2's mascot, a Greek sphinx with the head of a woman and wings of an eagle, stretched out her leonine body and eyed Bob as if he'd make a tasty snack.

The man from Rescue 8 said to Bob, "You want a good hosing down? Come on over, we'll get you cleaned up."

"He's fine," Paula said firmly. "Go see Scooter, Bob."

That night, while Steven finished the probie job of making sure everything was clean before it was stowed away, he thought more about Paula. Through all his weeks of academy training, he hadn't been sure about women in the department. Sure, they could pass the tests. But then there was the real world. Plunging into a fire with seventy or eighty pounds of gear, dragging lines filled with hundreds of pounds of water. Could Paula carry Steven out if he got injured in a fire? Steven's father, the retired fire lieutenant, didn't think so.

"Upper body strength is the one area where men will always be better than women," Tom Goodwin said as he and Steven watched a preseason football game. "She lifting weights?"

"Every day, down in the basement," Steven said.

Tom reached for more popcorn. "Never going to be the same."

Steven's newest girlfriend, Katie, was less interested in Paula's physical prowess and more interested in where she slept, where she showered, if she walked around the station in her underwear.

"Sure," Steven said. They were lying in bed with the lights of the city reflecting on the ceiling. "We all do. The captain wears a thong, and Scooter has boxers that say 'Firemen do it with big hoses.'"

Katie tweaked his left nipple. "I'm serious."

"She doesn't walk around in her bathrobe. What do you think, we have orgies while waiting for calls?"

She gave him a pout. "You've got a fairy mascot and a female firefighter. I don't know what goes on down there."

Steven knew some men on the other shifts and other stations gave Paula a hard time. Snide comments here and there. On Valentine's Day she came in and her locker was decorated with red condoms. After she skipped the annual Fireman's Ball, people like Jimmy said it was because she didn't want to bring her lesbian date.

"You don't know she's a lesbian," Steven said, over another game of pool at The Hose. "She takes care of her dad. He was sick that night. Why are you worried about it?"

"I'm not worried about her. I'm worried about you, with the little pink guy floating around when you're taking a shower. Might rub off."

"How'd you like this pool stick up your ass?" Steven said.

Jimmy said, "See! That's where it starts."

As if there weren't already gay firefighters in the department. Steven knew the rumors. Billy Heller, over at Ladder 12. Living with the same guy for five years, claiming they were cousins. Sam Capodilupo, used to be lead hose for Engine 23 before he got zapped by a fallen electrical wire. His "roommate" hadn't left his hospital room for two days. Things like that attracted attention. Heller's tires had been slashed a couple of times. Capodilupo had come back on the job, but after a couple of accidents—slippery floors, doors that opened unexpectedly and gave him black eyes—he transferred to a desk job in the Safety Division.

Steven thought he was doing a good job of putting up with fairy Bob, though it wasn't always easy. Before lights out each night Bob asked for a thimbleful of hot cocoa made with real milk and fresh whipped cream. Captain Ingalls had Steven fix it. Bob's breakfast every morning was fresh pineapple cut into splinter-sized portions. Steven was responsible for that as well. Bob slept in a specially crafted, multistoned oak birdhouse in the watch office. Steven had to keep the windows clean with lemon water, and make sure Bob's handkerchief-sized silk sheets were laundered with the mildest of soaps, and sweep glitter off the birdhouse floors with a fine, narrow paintbrush.

"Don't forget to shake out the rugs!" Bob would cheerfully remind him, and give him another damned kiss like a blood-sucking mosquito.

Worse than the kisses was Bob's whistling, that damn whistling, the day and night whistling. Steven started hearing it when he was at his father's house, arguing over fantasy football rankings with his dad. When making love to Lisa, who he'd started dating after Katie didn't work out. He heard whistling on the subway, in the supermarket, when he was standing at the river's edge and gazing at the dark water. Pink tights and butterfly wings and disco music and even the kisses, he could live with. But that ceaseless, high-pitched, off-tune whistling drove him nuts.

Whistle. Whistle.
Pause.
Whistle.
Whistle. Pause.
Whistle.

Still, better to say nothing. Three months he'd been with Engine 14, no problems. No fires bigger than his first one when the mother was killed. Some gruesome car accidents. Heart attacks and sprained ankles and stranded cats, oh my. Sometimes people came on by the firehouse looking for directions or first aid. All in all far less exciting and dangerous than Iraq, and Steven was happy for that.

Then Paula was out sick for a week. She liked the same newspaper comics that he did, and they usually bickered over who got to read them first. It was no fun to have the whole section to himself. Her temporary replacement was a sweaty man from Engine 2 with the unlikely name of Gordon Gordon.

"Why do you have two identical names?" Bob asked him at breakfast.

"Why do you have wings?" Gordon's smile didn't show any teeth. Bob did a somersault in mid-air. "To fly like a bird!"

Gordon's fingers tightened around his coffee cup. "Eddie, our satyr, doesn't have wings. Just really sharp horns."

They conducted two fire inspections that day. Gordon Gordon talked a lot about Eddie the satyr. Steven had seen the half-man, half-goat from afar, but never talked to him. The goat part was weird. Gordon Gordon agreed. But Eddie played a mean hand of poker, could bench-press five hundred pounds, and had personally dragged three firefighters out of a notorious blaze down on Pier 52.

"I'm just saying," Gordon Gordon added, watching Bob and his fairy friends play Simon Says in the parking lot. "A mascot like Eddie makes you proud you're a fireman."

Around four o'clock, just as Steven was thinking about starting dinner, two tones went off. Another car accident. This time a flipped SUV had landed on top of a station wagon in the middle of the cross-town expressway. The SUV driver was pinned upside down, his face covered with blood, half his scalp hanging free. He was conscious, somehow, and screaming. No words, just screams. Several inches beneath him, the driver of the station wagon—gender unrecognizable, body in squashed or torn pieces—was beyond anyone's help. But there was a blue child seat in the back and a kid, maybe only three or four years old, still alive under the crushed metal. She was whimpering.

"I REMEMBER ALL THE DEAD. THE WAY THEIR MOUTHS HUNG

"There, there." Bob said, soothing her from where he'd crawled into the wreckage "It's all right Do you like glitter? I can make all sorts of things sparkle Do you like magic? I know a trick or two."

Steven could hear the kid, but couldn't make out the exact words

Bob said, "I promise. I won't leave until you come with me Scout's honor"

Two other engines had responded to the call. Police officers detoured rubber-necking, frustrated drivers A news helicopter buzzed and rattled overhead, the noise making Steven's teeth itch The day was so unseasonably warm that sweat collected under his uniform and pooled at the small of his back. The weight and thickness of his turnout coat didn't help He could smell burning rubber, scorched metal, blood Gunpowder The stench of rotting bodies, seven of them, lined up neatly beside the road as flies filled their eyes and mouths

He stood there, the desert glare making his eyes hurt, his breathing tight under his uniform and vest, gun clutched so tightly in hand that his fingers ached.

This was wrong, all wrong He had left the desert behind him, hadn't he? Had left behind the dead and dying, the bitter and knowing gazes of survivors, the fetid waste and broken cities. Had vowed never again would he be helpless in the grip of politics and war Not with seven bodies on the road, a family who had offered friendly smiles the last time Steven's squad passed this way A family Three adults, three children, a baby with deep brown eyes and beautiful smile—

"Hey, probie," someone said, touching his arm.

He recoiled violently, pulling back with his gun raised. But there was no gun in his hand Nothing but his bare fingers, pointing at Gordon Gordon They were standing by the side of the expressway, surrounded by fire engines and police cars, helicopters—god damned helicopters!—overhead, an upside-down man screaming as blood pulsed out of his skull faster than paramedics could staunch it.

Steven fell to his knees, cement slamming against bone. He retched helplessly He was shivering under his coat, his muscles spasming like he had his fingers in an electrical socket When the vomiting stopped he realized a paramedic was taking his pulse, and someone else was pushing a bottle of water into his hands

"We'd better take him in, just in case," the paramedic was telling someone

"No." Steven took the water bottle but brushed the paramedic aside. "I'm okay."

Captain Ingalls almost made it an order, but after several minutes of arguing instead told Steven to take the rest of the day off. A police car dropped him off at his apartment He shed his gear in his living room, crawled into bed with a bottle of Jack Daniels, and turned on the TV. He didn't eat dinner He didn't answer his ringing phone He drank, vomited again sometime around sunset, fell into a restless sleep, and stumbled to the door when some stupid bastard started

"Nothing, my ass." Jimmy pulled out a chair, turned it backward, and straddled it. His scrubbed the sides of his head, ruffling his short brown hair. "You froze up? They said you were really out of it. Flashback? PTSD?"

"What are you, a psychiatrist?"

"The department can make you see a real shrink, Stevie boy. He swigged more whiskey "Only if I've got a real problem."

Jimmy pinned him with a stare "You've got something."

Steven shifted his focus to the wall "You don't think about it? Things that happened back there?"

"Not when I'm awake," Jimmy replied

Before leaving, Jimmy manhandled Steven to his bed, dumped him on the wrinkled sheets, and confiscated the Jack Daniels. He searched for the remote to the television, then gave up and turned the volume down by hand. Steven watched from the pillows He felt sore from the inside out

"I remember all the dead," Steven murmured. "The way their mouths hung open and you could see their black tongues."

"You've got to leave it behind," Jimmy said

Steven closed his eyes He could feel Jimmy's presence in the room, the solidness of his sturdy body and blue uniform. Brotherhood Soldiers and firemen, he thought The room was hot, and he pushed the sheet down to his bare waist

"Don't shut me out," Jimmy said softly "I couldn't stand that."

The floor creaked under shifting weight A long moment expanded, contracted up again Then, in the soft gray land between waking and sleeping, something gentle brushed against Steven's mouth Soft lips Warm breath. A caress—

He jerked awake with a jolt of fear and anger "Goddammit!" he swore, but he was all alone in the predawn light But someone had kissed him. He was sure of it Brief, tiny, forbidden. He wiped his lips and thought he saw the faintest hint of glitter

"Bob," he snarled, and lurched to the open window and ripped screen. The only thing to greet him was the landscape of city roofs and street lamps.

B-shift was off duty for the next two days. On Friday, Steven went to work with renewed resolve No more weakness No more losing control At roll call, Scooter slapped him on the back and Ingalls gave him a nod. Paula said, "Are you okay?" and he said, "Sure." Bob spun around him, his butterfly wings quick with concern

"Dearest, dearest, I was worried for you," Bob said

Steven dug his fingernails into his palms "I'm fine."

"I'm so happy to hear it!" Bob swirled and cartwheeled and then he started whistling, that stupid annoying whistling, and Steven's control vanished

"Stop that!" he snapped. "I swear to God, keep it up, I'll rip your wings off and shove them down your throat!"

Bob froze in mid-air

OPEN AND YOU COULD SEE THEIR BLACK TONGUES."

banging on it.

Jimmy pushed his way in, his expression grim.

"You're supposed to be on shift," Steven said thickly. He could still feel the whiskey burning in his belly and brain. Wanted more, but it was all the way back in his bedroom

"I am. Your captain called my captain, said go check on you. You look like hell And you stink. Go shower off, will you?"

Easier to obey than argue, but the soap and water felt more like chores than any kind of comfort. He took the whiskey with him to the kitchen. where Jimmy was pulling a hot pizza from the microwave

"Eat." Jimmy pushed him to a chair

"Not hungry," Steven replied, which was mostly true.

"Eat. And tell me what the hell happened out there."

Steven poked at the soft crust "Nothing."

"Steven!" Paula said

"It's all he goddamn does!" Steven said, his vision narrow and blurred on the edges He felt unexpectedly like weeping, and squashed the impulse with every bit of ruthlessness he owned. "Day and fucking night! It's inhumane. It's cruel and unusual punishment."

Bob sank to the floor, his wings stilled

Steven stalked off to the kitchen, where he sloshed hot coffee into a cup and over his fingers Captain Ingalls called him into his office a few minutes later and asked what the problem was.

"Nothing, sir," Steven insisted

"You bite Bob's head off for no good reason, and that's nothing?"

"The whistling's got to stop," Steven said "I know you hate it, too Everyone does."

Ingalls shook his head. "Bob whistles, Paula bites her nails, Scooter stinks up the bathroom, and you snore. I myself am exempt from irri-

tating habits, but the rest of you? Not perfect. Never will be. You need to apologize."

Steven stared at a spot beyond Ingalls's shoulder and kept silent.

"Not a choice, probie. You're a good man. Valuable. About a thousand times bigger than Bob, physically speaking. But today? You're the smaller man. I know things have been rough for you lately. But don't make them worse."

"Maybe I should transfer to another station, sir."

Ingalls reached for his coffee cup. "If it comes down to that, maybe so."

some areas. Engine 15 was trying to punch holes in the roof for ventilation. A body in the southwest stairwell- after some initial confusion, someone reported that it had probably been there for a while.

The smoke grew thicker, darker. Fueled by burning kerosene or tar, maybe. Steven caught a glimpse of bright red that was quickly obscured. Ten feet away. Maybe twenty. Hard to tell. Like stumbling around in deadly gray velvet. They almost collided with two other firefighters, one of them Jimmy Linden.

"This one's a bitch!" Jimmy yelled through his mask.

The fire leapt above their heads, a long tongue of bright hot light

FAIRIES LIVE FOREVER. THEY LIVE BY THEIR OWN

The shift passed slowly, with no calls or inspections to break up the long hours. The autumn sun was a stark yellow disk in the smoggy sky. Steven talked to no one unless he absolutely had to. Scooter and Paula spent hours trying to persuade Bob to come out of his birdhouse.

"He didn't mean it," Steven heard Paula say.

"You know how probies get when they're stressed out," Scooter added.

Bob didn't respond.

A few hours after a silent, tense lunch, three tones went off. A long, somber list of companies followed. "Engine 8, Engine 129, Engine 5, Ladder 3, Rescue 9, Rescue 156. Four-two-nine Pierre Street."

Not Engine 14, though. Steven felt an irrational anger that they weren't being called out to what sounded like a kick-ass fire, a real scorcher. Twenty minutes later, the tones sounded again.

"Engine 47, Engine 14, Ladder 2, Rescue 10," the dispatcher said. "Support units already on scene, four-two-nine Pierre Street."

Steven jumped up to his seat, saw Paula take her place, felt the movement of the engine as Scooter shifted into gear. They rolled out of the station house twenty seconds after the tone. Bob was with them, perched on Captain Ingalls's helmet. His jaunty cap was askew. He wore bright new purple boots with bells on the tips.

Fairies, Steven thought bitterly, and turned his shoulder.

They raced through the city streets to Pierre Street, where smoke rose from the roof of a five-story brick warehouse. Steven's heart clenched the minute he saw the place. Old building, shuttered and abandoned for years. Only a few windows to vent poisonous fumes and broiling heat. Only a handful of exits in and out, including a loading dock by a set of rusty train tracks. Drug addicts or homeless schizophrenics might be living inside, might have started the fire. Or a pyromaniac, or arsonists. Collecting insurance on an old warehouse was often a more valuable proposition than trying to clean it up and rent it.

Paula shouted, "This one's going to be bad!"

The district chief was already on the scene, directing crews and equipment. "Reports of squatters inside," he said, worrying the edges of his mustache with one hand. "Fucker's spread out, hiding. Up on the fifth floor, some on four and three, try to keep it off two."

After a brief conference, Ingalls directed Paula and Steven to take a line up the northwest stairwell to support a crew from Engine 129. They lugged their hose over a hundred yards of jagged asphalt and plunged into the gray interior. Smoke rolled thickly through the air, limited visibility. No sign of flames, but the air was charged with heat. The warehouse was an oven that would grow hotter the longer the flames went unchecked. Three hundred degree air at waist level, a thousand or more degrees at the high ceilings. Crematorium heat. They dragged the hose up to the second floor and into a storeroom with solid brick walls. Sweat rolled into Steven's eyes, and he couldn't raised a gloved hand under his confining mask to clear his vision.

"Keep going!" Paula ordered.

The radio crackled with reports from other crews. Flames for sure up on the third floor, northeast. Steel fire doors closed off on the fourth floor. The sprinkler system wasn't working. Zero visibility in

Paula aimed the hose she and Steven were carrying and opened up the nozzle. The pressurized hose bucked and jerked in Steven's grip. Together with Jimmy and his partner they advanced several feet, but then the rolling flames shifted across the wooden rafters and grew brighter. Oxygen from somewhere above was feeding it, boosting it.

"Back off!" The mask muffled Paula's order, and the roar of fire nearly drowned it out completely. "We're going to need more help."

Jimmy's partner yelled, "We can handle it!"

"Not without more help!" Paula shouted back.

Requests for aid were already filling the radio. Steven could imagine Dispatch sending out more engines, more ladders. Hard-liners lived for these kinds of fires. the terrifying, exhilarating ones, the ones that made legends. At that moment Steven didn't care so much for legends. He wanted out, out as quickly as possible, out to fresh, cool air and as much water as he could drink.

Above them, the flames started arcing down like hungry, grasping fingers.

"Let's go!" Jimmy's partner yelled, and the four of them retreated across the storeroom.

One moment Steven's world was dark gray. In the next, black smoke swept down like an ocean of ink and cut off all visibility. He couldn't see his own feet, couldn't see the edges of his mask. The light on his helmet illuminated nothing. His only link to Paula was the hose, which jerked out of his grasp and slipped away altogether. He flailed his hands, bent over, but couldn't find it.

"Paula!" he shouted. "Jimmy!"

No answer. None that he could hear, at least. A freight train of noise, the sound of the inferno, rushed down on him. Steven spun in the darkness, tried to remember how many paces they'd come, told himself panic would kill him. He had at least ten minutes of oxygen left. Plenty of time to find a way out. For Jimmy to find him, for Paula to grab his hand. But he was alone, frantically alone, and the heat beating into his brain made it impossible to stay calm.

He keyed the radio, trying not to sound shit-scared. "Command, this is Goodwin. I'm on the second floor. Can't see a thing. Can't see anyone."

No answer. Hadn't they heard him? Steven's chest burned with fear and smoke. "Command, do you hear me? I'm lost."

"Easy, kid," a voice responded. Gruff, an old-timer, maybe the battalion chief himself. "We'll find you. Just stay low and still, got it? Let your alarm lead us to you."

His gear included a motion sensor alarm, geared to go off if he stopped moving for thirty continuous seconds. A minute passed. He couldn't hear the alarm at all, just that dull rushing whoosh of fire eating wood and anything else in its way.

"It's not working!" he said frantically.

"Easy, easy," the voice told him.

Steven's throat closed up, from dryness or danger both. His hands shook uncontrollably. He was on the floor but couldn't remember lying down, was gasping for air but couldn't find enough of it to breathe.

Then a rainbow glow, the flutter of wings. "Dearest!" someone said, high and frantic. Tinkerbob burrowed under the edges of

Steven's mask and flitted in front of his eyes.

"Bob," he wheezed.

"You have to crawl," Bob said. "Crawl, crawl! I'll tell you where."

"Can't," he said.

Bob kissed his nose, his cheeks. Little pricks of cool lips. "You have to, dearest. Straight on for fifty feet. I'm right here with you. Faines always know how to find the sun."

He tried rolling to his knees. Ordered his arms and legs to respond, to obey his will. But his brain and muscles had disconnected. He could do nothing but gasp in hot air and tremble, his whole body shutting down. Above him, the red flames were turning yellow and orange. Like the desert sky, stretching endlessly over a barren landscape. He'd delivered death there, or been the cause of it. Seven corpses, black and rotting.

"Oh, dearest," Bob said. "How can I help?"

"Whistle," Steven coughed out. A different alarm was sounding now. His oxygen, running out. If he kept the mask on, he would suffocate on his own carbon dioxide. If he whipped it off, he'd burn his lungs and choke on the toxic smoke. Already he could taste it, the poisonous fumes shutting down his voice and throat. "Whistle for me, Bob."

Gloved hands gripped his boots just as the blackness consumed him.

Steven didn't die in the warehouse fire.

But five other firefighters did, as did Bob.

Jimmy and Steven's father broke the news to him while he was in the hospital. His father said, "Two men from Engine 3, three from Rescue 2. Got disoriented, trapped. Ran out of air. Bob was the only mascot we lost. He went looking for you, but the fire got to him first."

"He found me," Steven insisted past an aching, seared throat. His whole body hurt from dehydration and heat exhaustion. A headache was squeezing his brain, and the bright fluorescent lights of the hospital room didn't help. "He talked to me."

"He was coming down from the fourth floor," Jimmy said. "Never got out of the stairwell."

"He whistled. Attracted help."

"That was your motion alarm, Steven," Jimmy said.

Three days later, the Massasoit Fire Department gave the fallen firefighters a splendid memorial parade. The ranks were joined by firefighters and supernatural companions from several other cities, and even a unit that drove down from Canada. The mile-long procession made its way down Broad Avenue in long columns of black coats and black boots, with bagpipe music cutting through the autumn chill. Vintage fire wagons carried the coffins. Four white unicorns drew Bob's, which lay atop a bed of roses and daffodils. Thumb-sized faines sat on the roses and wept behind tiny black veils. Steven wasn't well enough to march but he did so anyway, two hours in the bitter cold, faltering only when they reached the cemetery. He and Jimmy sat on a low stone wall while a reverend and an elf delivered eulogies.

"You got to keep going," Jimmy said when the ceremony was over. "You can't quit."

Brittle dead leaves stirred in the breeze, brushing against Steven's shoes. He said, "I was mad at him for coming to my apartment. For kissing me while I was asleep. Bad enough I had to put up with him at work, but in my own place? Never."

Jimmy was rock still beside him.

"But it wasn't him, was it?" Steven asked. "It was you."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Jimmy snapped. He stood up with his hands jammed in his pockets. "I got to go. Shift starts in an hour."

He started to walk away, then turned back with his chin lifted high. Two spots of color stained his otherwise pale cheeks. "I would n't," he said. "I'm not some queer. That's not who I am. You just dreamt it, whatever it was."

Steven watched him walk away.

The mourners dispersed slowly, heading off to bars or homes for good old-fashioned wakes full of food and beer and reminiscing. Paula was the last left at the graveside. She came to him with her long black coat flapping in the breeze, her tears bright on her cheeks.

"I meant to visit you in the hospital," she said. "See how you're doing. But then I remembered how I felt when I was in there, all

RULES AND PASSIONS, NOT YOURS. LET HIM GO.

burned up, and my two friends were dead. Anytime anyone asked me how I was doing, I just wanted to scream."

"Are you going to tell me it'll get better someday?"

"Maybe it will, and maybe it won't," Paula said. "I don't know how it'll be for you. But I do know someone wants to see you."

He looked away. "I don't want to see anyone."

"Yes, you do. Trust me."

Paula led him past Bob's grave to a copse of fir and pine trees. Steven heard the rustle of feathers before he saw them. The golden phoenix, the Supreme Fire Chief, was sitting like a statue amid the trees. She seemed diminished, shrunken somehow. Wrapped in feathers of gray grief. Steven flinched under her gaze and took a step backward, but Paula's hand on his shoulder steadied him.

"It's okay," Paula said. "She just wants to talk."

Later, Jimmy and his father will ask him what the phoenix told him. Steven can't say for sure. He remembers climbing onto the bird's back and holding tight as she lifted into the sky, her wide wings gliding on wind and current, her beak turned toward the sun. He remembers soaring through clouds of twinkling rainbow lights and hearing some whistling, some joyous off key whistling. *Faines live forever*, he thinks she said. *They live by their own rules and passions, not yours. Let him go.*

He also thinks she told him not to give up on his very important job, but maybe that's something he told himself.

Three weeks later he returned to Engine 14. Some changes had already been made. Paula had asked for and received a transfer over to Engine 25, closer to her home and sick father. Steven had taken her to dinner twice since that day in the cemetery and hoped to take her some more. He was seeing a therapist and attending a veterans' group, and that was helping a little. The firehouse, dunng his absence, had received a new mascot. Seamus O'Finn O'Flaherty was a three-foot-tall leprechaun encased in a green velvet costume. He lived in a van in the parking lot, along with Mrs. O'Finn O'Flaherty and their six small children and a tiny dog. Seamus liked to cook dinner and volunteered for permanent meal duty. Unfortunately, Captain Ingalls said, most of his recipes were some variation on corned beef and cabbage.

"I like corned beef, sir," Steven said.

"Not every night, you won't."

Paula's replacement was a seasoned firefighter who'd been riding a desk over in the Safety Division.

"Sam Capodilupo," he said, offering his hand. Capodilupo was a handsome man, with wide shoulders and a firm handshake. But something in his eyes was wary, cautious. As if Steven might be dangerous.

It took a moment for Steven to remember the rumors about Capodilupo. The insinuations and gossip. He thought of Jimmy, over at Engine 129. Of Bob in his coffin. Of wars fought in deserts, and wars fought in the heart.

"Sorry about your mascot," Capodilupo added.

Steven thought he heard whistling, distant but cheerful.

"Best fairy I ever worked with," Steven said. "Come on. Let's get some coffee. I hear Seamus brews it green." ❧

Whether you're made of metal and oil or flesh and bone, love can be an incredible transformative force.

trans for ma tions

BY DAVID BARR KIRTLEY
ILLUSTRATION BY ROB JOHNSON

CARRUS IS IN HIS VEHICLE FORM—A RED SPORTS CAR—AND IS DRIVING DOWN a suburban street. He's going fast and not paying attention, just like the boy who suddenly dashes out from behind a mailbox and into the road. Carrus brakes.

His bumper strikes the boy, spins him, flings him to the pavement. Carrus idles a moment, then runs a scan on the boy, who lies stunned.

Broken arm. Damn it.

Carrus pulls forward. His passenger door opens, and he says, "Hey. Get in. I'll take you home." It's a gross violation of orders, but he isn't just going to leave the boy there.

HIS PASSENGER COMPARTMENT FOLDS IN

The boy lifts a face full of hurt and suspicion. Then the boy notices that the driver's seat is empty, a fact normally hidden by the deeply tinted windows.

Carrus speaks again. "Come on, get in."

The boy rises, cradling his arm. He's maybe twelve, but tall, slender. Ash-blond hair curls down the back of his neck. He steps closer, his bright blue eyes darting. "Where — are you?"

Carrus says, "Notice the car parked in front of you? The one that just hit you? That's me. Now come on."

For a moment the boy's expression changes to wonder. He scrambles into the passenger seat.

Carrus shuts the door and starts moving. "Where do you live?"

That way." The boy points, grimacing, trying to hide his pain. He looks around the car's interior. "Do you have a name?"

I call myself Carrus. It means: chariot."

I'm Alex," the boy says. "That's my house, up there on the right. The blue one."

Carrus drives up to the house. "I'm sorry about your arm. Please don't tell anyone about what I am." He opens his passenger door.

"I won't." Alex climbs out onto the sidewalk. "Where did you come from? Who made you?"

I can't tell you."

Why?"

I can't tell you that either."

When will I see you again?"

You won't," Carrus says, closing the door, speeding away.

BUT HE HAS NOWHERE TO GO, NOTHING TO DO BUT CRUISE the endless roads. He finds himself back in that neighborhood, circling that block, coasting past Alex's blue house and imagining the life within. The kitchen windows face the street, and sometimes Carrus spots a father, a mother, and Alex eating together.

One afternoon, as Carrus reaches the stop sign at the end of the block, he notices Alex, waiting, seated nearby on a low stone wall. Alex says, "I saw you."

Carrus is silent.

Alex stands. "Can I get in? I want to talk."

Carrus hesitates, then decides to hell with it and opens his passenger door. Alex gets in.

Carrus asks, "How's your arm?"

Better." Alex flexes the arm to show that it's healed. "Why do you keep driving by my house?"

I don't know. Boredom."

I didn't know cars got bored." When Carrus doesn't answer, Alex says, "I'm bored too. Want to go to the mall? Do you know where that is?"

Yes." Carrus pulls away from the curb and turns left. Alex grins and fastens his seatbelt.

Carrus drives past several stop signs, then turns right onto a busier street lined with strip malls. Alex says, "Who made you, Carrus? The government?"

No."

Who then? Where are you from?"

Carrus debates with himself. Finally he says softly, "Off world."

Alex's eyes widen. "You mean space?"

Yes."

Wow. So ... what are you doing here?"

Again, Carrus debates. Do his orders even matter anymore? Will his story be too frightening? Finally he tells the truth. "Your world lies in a demilitarized region of space. As tensions built, it was decided to secretly deploy forces here." He shifts to the fast lane and speeds past two cars. "So that we could move about without being detected, we were designed to blend in. Our mission, once the order came, was to rapidly seize all vital infrastructure and resources."

You mean ... take over the world?"

Yes." Carrus rolls to a stop at a red light. "But then hostilities erupted elsewhere, and the war shaped up differently than expected. This world is no longer of any strategic importance."

"How ... many of you are there?"

Fifty. We're on furlough now, wandering. I'm sure eventually the planners will find some use for us, deploy us elsewhere, but our ability to mimic Earth vehicles no longer serves any purpose. We're under standing orders to maintain a covert posture, so I shouldn't be telling you any of this, but I don't think it really matters anymore."

Alex stares at the dashboard, the ceiling, the seats. "How could you take over? You don't even have a cannon."

"I can reconfigure to a humanoid form for infantry operations. And my arsenal is compact but devastating."

"You mean ... you can change into, like, a robot?"

"Yes."

Alex bounces with excitement. "Show me!"

I thought you wanted to go to the mall?"

"Screw the mall."

The light turns green. Carrus pulls a U-turn. "All right, but we'll have to find someplace more isolated."

They head out of town and into the woods, then wander the dirt backroads. Finally Carrus finds a long gravel drive that dead-ends beside a grassy field ringed with evergreens. He says, "Okay, get out. And back up. You don't want to be too close."

Alex exits and dashes to just inside the treeline. Carrus runs a scan of the area to make sure no one else is lurking about. Then

His passenger compartment folds in on itself as roof joins with seats. His chassis splits behind the doors and arches up. His rear half extends and divides into two legs that raise his front half aloft. His hood folds down to become a chest. Black arms unfold from beneath red doors that now hang off his shoulders like armor plates. His head rides up from deep within his bowels to rest atop his shoulders.

He towers over Alex, who races from the embrace of the trees to shout an ecstatic, "Holy shit!"

ONE WEEK LATER, CARRUS PICKS UP ALEX AGAIN. AS CARRUS pulls away from the curb, Alex displays a small red toy car and a plastic action figure of a blond-haired boy. Alex says, "Look what I got. It's us." The toys do indeed bear a faint resemblance to Carrus and Alex. Alex places the toys in a tray on the dashboard.

Carrus says, "Where do you want to go?"

"Let's just drive."

Carrus steers in the direction of the highway.

Alex says, "So who are you fighting, in this war?"

"We call them the Kaav. Amphibious beasts."

ON ITSELF AS ROOF JOINS WITH SEATS.

Alex's voice is soft with awe. "Have you ever seen one?"

"No."

"Who are you fighting for?"

"The Anaurins. Mammalian bipeds, like you."

Alex takes this in. Suddenly something occurs to him. "Hey, Carrus. How old are you?"

"Three."

"That's all?"

"I was built for this mission. I've known nothing but the factory that gave me life, the transport ship that brought me here, and Earth. Of course, I have knowledge of many other things, but it's not first-hand knowledge."

"Oh." Alex thinks a moment. "Is three old or young, for a robot?"

"Young," Carrus replies. "Very young."

Carrus reaches the on ramp. He takes it, then cruises down the highway. Traffic is light.

Alex asks, "How fast can you go?"

"Fast." Carrus accelerates to eighty.

"Show me."

"You won't be scared?"

"No way." Alex shakes his head emphatically.

"All right." Carrus speeds up to one-twenty. He weaves, whizzing by other cars.

Alex urges, "Come on. Faster!"

Carrus speeds up to one-fifty.

Alex grins. "Faster!"

Carrus sweeps past a patrol car parked in the shadow of an overpass. Immediately the patrol car flashes its lights and pulls out onto the highway.

Alex glances back over his shoulder. "Oh shit, what if it catches us?"

"It won't," Carrus says, and shows how fast he can go.

The acceleration presses Alex back against the headrest. The toy car and boy topple from the dashboard and bounce beneath the seat. Instantly, the patrol car vanishes from view.

Later, as Carrus cruises leisurely along, Alex says, "That was awesome! Awesome!" Alex rolls down his window and thrusts his hand out into the gusting air, and as the breezes twine between his fingers, he laughs and laughs.

WHEN ALEX IS SIXTEEN HE SNEAKS OUT AFTER BEDTIME, AND Carrus drives him to a party at the house of a high school student whose parents are away. Carrus waits at the end of the driveway with the other vehicles while groups of giggling teens wander by toward an enormous house, its windows brimming with festive light. Hours later, Alex stumbles back and collapses in the passenger seat. Carrus runs a scan on him, which reveals heavy intoxication.

Alex dozes most of the way home. When Carrus pulls up at Alex's darkened house, Alex rouses himself and says, "Thanks for the ride."

"Sure."

Alex hunches forward. "Hey, I have to tell you something. I promised her I wouldn't tell, but ... I had sex with Hailey Jacobsen."

"What? Tonight?"

"No, she wasn't there. I mean last week. At her house, after school. Except then her stupid brother got himself kicked out of military school, and now he's always hanging around the house. So we can't do it there anymore."

After a time, Carrus says carefully, "I understand that people sometimes have sex in cars."

Alex is silent. Then, "No. It would be weird."

"Come on. Please."

Alex says, "You actually want me to?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Carrus says, "I want to see what it's like."

"So watch a movie."

"It's not the same. I want to be there."

"I don't know, I ... " Then something occurs to Alex. He ponders it. He says, "If I did this, I'd want a favor in return."

"Anything."

Alex stares, serious. "You mean that? Anything?"

"Yes."

"You promise?"

"Yes."

Alex eases open the passenger door and slips out. He whispers, "All right. I'll think about it."

THE NEXT WEEKEND, CARRUS PICKS UP ALEX IN THE EARLY afternoon and they drive to a nearby corner where Hailey Jacobsen is waiting. She is petite and pale with long scarlet hair, and wears a black tanktop and jean skirt. When Alex waves to her, she stares at Carrus in amazement.

She gets into the passenger seat. "This is your car?"

"It's a friend's," Alex says. "I'm borrowing it."

"Cool." Hailey smiles. "So where are we going?"

"Someplace special," Alex tells her.

He drives to the end of the gravel road beside the secluded field where Carrus first revealed his humanoid form.

Alex parks, then cups Hailey's chin and kisses her deeply. She wraps her arms around his neck and pushes her fingers through his hair. Alex reaches across her body and fumbles for the latch to recline her seat, but can't find it, so Carrus reclines the seat himself. Then Alex stretches and shifts until he's lying on top of Hailey. He pulls a condom from his pocket.

She glances out the window. "What if someone ... ?"

"They won't," Alex assures her.

As Alex and Hailey undress each other, Carrus runs a scan on them, observes with fascination the redistribution of their blood, their release of hormones, the rapid acceleration of their hearts. Carrus watches Hailey's face in the rearview mirror—her closed eyes, her hair spilling across the headrest, her mouth stretched wide as she murmurs. "Oh Alex, that feels so good, oh, faster Alex, yes, like that, faster."

During the ride home Alex is quiet. He drops off Hailey, then drives to his house. As he exits, he says flatly, "I shouldn't have done that. She had a right to know. About you."

Carrus departs. Hailey's body has left a damp spot on his seat, near the place where his heart should be, when he transforms into the shape of a man.

FOR THREE WEEKS ALEX IS NEVER OUT WAITING WHEN CARRUS drives by. When Alex finally appears, he looks tired and miserable.

RICTUS WAS RIGHT. CARRUS IS A TOOL

He gets into the passenger seat

Carrus drives aimlessly for a while, then asks, "How have you been?

Alex stares at nothing. "She said she wasn't ready. For a relationship. Then two weeks later she's seeing someone else. Two weeks." He presses his forehead against the side window. "You're so lucky. That you're a robot. That you don't have feelings."

"I'm a biomechanical sentience. I have emotions just like you."

"Not like me," Alex insists. "Not like this." He says softly, "Trust me, you're lucky. I mean, you can change. When you can't stand what you are, you can turn into something else. God, I wish I could do that, just for a little while."

Alex has Carrus drive out to the end of the gravel road. Then Alex rests back against the seat and closes his eyes. "She... I ... I can almost ... " He stops. He opens his eyes. "You promised you'd do anything for me."

"I did."

"Anything."

"Yes."

Alex takes a deep breath. "I want you to bring me with you. Into space. To fight the Kaav with you."

"I can't—"

"Please, Carrus. You promised. You said anything. I have to get out of here. This world has nothing for me."

Carrus says, "It's not up to me. I... I don't know. Are you sure that's what you want?"

"Yes," Alex answers, fervent.

Carrus explains, "Look, all our forces are deployed far away. Even if I could get permission to take you, which I doubt, none of our transports will pass this way for years."

Alex slumps, defeated.

"I'm sorry," Carrus says. "You know that if there was anything I could do, anything at all—"

Alex whispers, "There is."

"What?"

"Transform."

Carrus is suddenly afraid. He imagines his roof crashing down, and blood. "I don't know what you mean."

Alex stares at the floor. "Yes you do."

"No," Carrus says. "I won't."

Alex looks up, his face cold, angry. "Anything, you said. Anything."

"Alex, I won't do it."

"This is such bullshit!" Alex kicks the dashboard. "You promise me anything and you give me nothing. Nothing!"

"Alex, I'm sorry."

Alex sighs and presses his face into his hand. "Take me home."

They drive the whole way in silence. Then Alex exits, slamming the door behind him.

After that Carrus is reluctant to face any more anger, or cause any more disappointment. He gets on the highway and heads west. He's away for two years.

FINALLY CARRUS DECIDES TO GO BACK. HE DRIVES TOWARD Alex's house. Carrus is almost there when he realizes that he's being tailed by a black SUV.

Carrus doesn't recognize it. He runs a scan, which reveals that the SUV is a class 3 war mech, like himself. He tries sending it a coded message. If the mech is an ally, it should identify itself.

It doesn't.

Carrus leads it through the woods and down dirt roads. He loses sight of the SUV, but knows that it's right behind him. If he has to make a stand, he'll do so in a place he knows well.

He reaches the gravel drive, rumbles down it to its end, and pulls into the field. In this spot where he first revealed his humanoid form he does so again. He snaps his hand-rifle from his waist and crouches, aiming back down the road, knowing that he'll have to resort to a mace if the enemy has shields, as it almost certainly does.

The black SUV draws near. Carrus's trigger finger tightens.

The SUV unfolds, revealing a broad, powerful humanoid form that Carrus suddenly recognizes: an ally, the mech who calls himself Rictus.

Carrus lowers his rifle. "You could have identified yourself," told me it was you."

Rictus strides forward. "I wanted to observe your response."

Rictus has a fondness for observation, for spying. His exterior used to be blue. Carrus says, "You got a paint job."

Rictus surveys his black body. "I find this more fitting."

"Who did it for you?"

"A human."

"Our orders were to avoid detection by them."

Rictus says slyly, "As if you're one to talk."

Carrus feels a sudden panic. Rictus knows about Alex.

But Rictus doesn't seem to care. He says, "At any rate, my paint job has not jeopardized the big secret of our presence here. The human who did it will tell no tales. I've discovered a fascinating property of this world. A car can kill a human and drive away, and other humans barely take notice, it is so common. A car can do this over, and over, and over." Rictus studies his right hand, flexes it, and says absently, "Ah, I shall miss this place. War, I suppose, will offer its own compensations, but I fear that when it comes to exercising my talents, nothing will ever compare with being a car on Earth."

Carrus says, "War?"

Rictus looks up. "Yes. We are being redeployed. The transport arrives in three days. The official order will come down soon."

Carrus is reluctant. He thinks of Alex.

Rictus senses this and says sharply, "You must curb these unseemly preoccupations. Remember what you are: a tool of destruction. Ready yourself, Carrus. We are off to fight the Kaav, at last."

FOUR HOURS LATER. CARRUS PARKS ACROSS THE STREET FROM an auto body shop. Alex, wearing an oil-stained T-shirt and wiping his hands on a rag, emerges from the garage. Carrus wonders: Was it at a place like this that Rictus got himself repainted? Was the human that Rictus then ran down someone like Alex?

Alex sees Carrus, walks across the road, gets into the passenger seat, and says lightly, "Hey, long time no see."

Carrus says, "Alex, I need to ask you something important, and I need to ask you now. Do you still want to go with me, into space, to fight the Kaav?

OF DESTRUCTION, AND ALWAYS WILL BE.

Alex's good humor fades. "You said that was impossible."

"I said it would be years, and that I didn't know. Well, now I do. You can come, if that's what you still want." This has meant making deals and calling in favors, but Carrus intends to keep his promise.

Alex is incredulous. "Now you offer me this? Now?"

"Alex, I'm leaving tonight to go rendezvous with the transport. I need an answer."

Then the answer is no."

"You understand that this will be your only chance?"

Alex groans. "Carrus, I can't leave. I have a life, a job. I'm getting married next spring. I'm in love. You wouldn't understand."

Carrus exclaims, "I do understand! I do have feelings. Why won't you ever believe me?"

Alex lowers his head. "Okay. I'm sorry."

After a time, Carrus says, "I'm sorry too."

They sit in silence. Then Alex opens the door and gets out. He stands there a moment, then says, "Goodbye, Carrus," and walks back to the garage.

CARRUS GOES TO WAR. DURING ONE BATTLE, CARRUS AND Rictus are hit with a biotech weapon. As a parasite rapidly, painfully devours their minds, Carrus and Rictus drive at top speed through a ruined alien city toward their evacuation point, a blocky gray tower. A red moon hangs on the horizon like a bleeding eye.

Carrus and Rictus reach the base of the tower, reconfigure to humanoid form, and with rifles bared storm the entryway, which is, fortunately, deserted.

As Carrus climbs the stairs, his mind is a swirl of agony. The pain shrinks his focus to a single form—the black shape of Rictus stumbling on ahead. A thought comes to Carrus then with terrible clarity: Rictus was right. Carrus is a tool of destruction, and always will be.

When they are halfway up the tower, a wave of torment seizes Rictus and he collapses, shrieking. He drops his hand-rifle, which clatters away down the steps.

Carrus thinks of Alex, and of the unlucky human who painted Rictus black. Carrus readies a mace.

Rictus lolls his head, stares up. "What . . ?"

"You should have stuck with blue," Carrus says, and swings at Rictus's face. The mace glances off Rictus's shields, which ripple with violet light. Carrus strikes again, and again the blow is deflected, but now the light is dimmed.

"Wait," Rictus cries, flailing. On the third stroke his shields calve, and the mace crumples him.

Carrus tosses aside the mace, hefts his hand-rifle, presses it to Rictus's staved-in head, and fires. Rictus goes limp, black fluid gouting from his ruined face.

Then Carrus clambers up a thousand more steps to the roof. He collapses, wracked with pain. He must endure it. He must—

He pops open his chest, reaches deep inside, and pulls out two tiny objects that have lain inside him for ages—two toys, a car and a boy. Carrus holds one up in each hand.

He wobbles the boy and thinks, "Hey, Carrus, when you're done fighting come back to Earth. We'll go for a drive together, you and I."

He wobbles the toy car and thinks, "I'll do that, Alex. I'll—

Agony overwhelms Carrus. He screams.

From the gray sky, a roar of engines. They're coming to retrieve him. He has to make it. He has to—

Endure.

CARRUS IS RESCUED, REPAIRED, DISCHARGED. HE RETURNS TO Earth, where due to time dilation twenty-five years have passed. Carrus learns that Alex owns a house now. Carrus drives to it, parks in the driveway, and waits.

After a time, an attractive woman in her early forties with long brown hair appears at the front door. She hurries out to the driveway, scrutinizes Carrus, then stomps back into the house. Carrus hears her shouting angrily.

Alex comes to the door. He walks out to Carrus and gets in the driver's seat. Alex is stocky, his blond hair thinning at the temples. He says, "I didn't know if you'd ever make it back."

"Neither did I," Carrus says. "Was that your wife?"

"Yes."

"Why is she upset?"

Alex says, "She thought maybe I bought you, an expensive sports car. That's something guys my age do."

Carrus is mystified, but in a pleasant way. This is what he loves, these silly things. These human lives.

Alex says, "So you really did it? Went to war? Fought the Kaav?"

"Yes," Carrus says. "We won."

"Wow." Alex shakes his head, amazed.

Carrus adds, "I mean, I fought their machines. It was a proxy war. I've still never actually seen the Kaav." He asks, "How have you been?"

"Fine. Good. I don't know." Alex hesitates. Carrus waits. Finally Alex says, "My life . . . my wife. See, it's not that I don't love her. She's great. And the kids. It's just that . . . I always thought there would be more, you know? I always thought I'd go with you, into space, to fight the Kaav."

Carrus says, "It wasn't that great."

I'm sure sometimes it wasn't. But still . . ." Alex sighs. "You were always the lucky one, Carrus. The powerful one, the one with the mission, the one who could transform."

Oh, Alex, Carrus thinks. I can change between a sports car and a machine of war, but you're the one who can truly transform, in a way I can only envy. Or do you somehow think that you're still that same little boy I met all those years ago?

Alex asks, "So what now?"

Carrus says, "Let's go for a drive together, you and I."

CARRUS PULLS AWAY FROM THE HOUSE AND HEADS THROUGH town to an on-ramp. Soon he's cruising down the highway, going sixty. He says, "Do you remember?"

"Yes," Alex whispers, and then, "Faster."

Carrus goes one hundred.

Alex grins. "Faster!"

And later, as they coast along, Alex rolls down his window and thrusts his spread fingers out into the open air, and for the first time in ages Carrus listens to the sound of Alex, laughing. ❧

BY JOE MURPHY ILLUSTRATION BY LORI KOEFOED

On Tuesday It Rained Horned Toads

It did rain horned toads, but that's hardly the most amazing thing that happened to Jacob and Beth that week.

The sun, a swollen red blob, was melting into the mesquite trees and scrub when a dark silhouette appeared. Jacob blinked and wiped at the sweat burning his eyes. Tired as he was, he couldn't help but stare. The porch swing where he sat halted its listless arc, growing as still as the heavy summer heat. On the far end of the porch, Walter stopped twirling his damned hubcap and grew still.

Jacob didn't know which surprised him most. The fence post thin shadow that now trudged past the weathered henhouse, through the torpid chickens, and the dirt and dust of their front yard. Or his hubcap twirling fifteen-year-old, the broken boy who never noticed anything. For Walter too stared at the newcomer, a rapt intensity on his sweaty, pimply face.

"Now who might that be," Jacob muttered, more to himself than the boy Walter didn't answer. Walter never answered

Jacob leaned back, his spine twinged, arms aching from the long day. He rapped the screen door and called out, "Beth! Company coming."

A Bible thumper on the parlor radio was ranting about President Eisenhower's new policies. The sound clicked off, replaced by footsteps, slow and sluggish as the heat. The screen door creaked and his wife stood beside him.

Beth lifted a gaunt hand to shade her eyes. Hair touched with gray, home cut, almost like a man's, his wife's face was thin. Cheeks sunken and lined, her shoulders were stooped and draped in an old house dress as faded as Jacob felt.

The silhouette halted in front of the porch. "Evening." It was a girl's voice.

"Evening," both Jacob and his wife returned. Jacob reached up and touched the brim of his battered Stetson. Walter silently stared at the stranger.

"I wonder if I could trouble you for some water," the shadowed girl said.

Beth started to turn toward the house but Jacob, frowning, touched her arm. "I wonder if I could trouble you for a name."

"Sorry." The girl brushed at her dress. "Forgot my manners." She wiped her hand on her side and stepped up on the porch. "I'm Sprokly Maezel." She stuck out her hand and waited.

Jacob stared at the hand. Something wasn't quite right. The hand was too dark. Yet the girl didn't sound or look like a Negro or even a Mexican. After a moment, he reached out and his fingers closed around it.

The breath stopped in his lungs. Her hand was wooden, a fake arm perhaps? Even though her fingers gripped his in a good firm handshake, Jacob knew wood when he felt it.

Dimly, he heard Beth gasp, saw from the corner of his eye a paleness to his wife's leathery complexion as she stared over her spectacles at this oddly named girl. Though the orange-red sun still hindered his vision, Jacob leaned forward, his gaze traveling from the wooden hand, up an equally dark wrist, to a jointed elbow. Her upper arm, still the color of bleached mahogany, disappeared into a gingham sleeve.

Jacob stared at her oval-shaped face. Shadows hid the rest, except for the eyes. Blue eyes, which didn't glint the way normal eyes did, but gazed back at him with a dull lifelessness at odds with the strength of her grip. Eyes that looked more painted than real.

"We're," his wife croaked and then coughed. "We're the Parkers. My husband, Jacob. Our boy, Walter."

"My wife, Beth." Jacob finally remembered to release the wooden hand.

The Sprokly girl nodded stiffly. "Pleased to meet you."

"I'll get you some water," Beth said and ducked into the darkened house.

Jacob, remembering his own manners, reluctantly gestured at the empty side of the porch swing. "Care to sit a spell?"

"Thank you, sir." Sprokly smoothed her dress, turned, and sat down beside him. The porch swing creaked with the extra weight. But it was the clunk as she sat, the unmistakable sound of wood upon wood, that forced Jacob to ease away from her until the arm rail creased his back.

Turned now, her face was exposed by the sun. Jacob's mouth, already dry, managed a swallow. An ear as finely carved as the cedar roses his grandpa used to make. Her cheeks too were wooden as wood could be. She blinked in the brightness and Jacob could have sworn her eyelids weren't nothing more than trimmed leather pieces that rolled down and up like window shades.

An uneasy stillness started in the pit of his stomach and wormed through him. Like the chaparral before a storm, or the way he'd felt when their last bull had tangled in the barbwire fence and died.

"Sorry there's no ice." Beth returned, the screen door closing with an eerie clunk that reminded Jacob of the noise the stranger had made in sitting down. Beth reached past him hesitantly, her arm stretched as far as it would go. Sprokly reached in return, wooden fingers closing upon the jelly jar glass with a quiet tippety-tap.

"We don't get much company out here," Beth said.

"And none," Jacob added ever so carefully, "that are made of wood."

Sprokly sipped the water before placing her hands and glass in her lap. She sighed, and it was as human a sound as any Jacob had ever heard. At last she looked up at him, her eyes still flat and lifeless, but the way she leaned, the curve of her body, showed a coiled tightness that disturbed Jacob.

"I do apologize," Sprokly said, "if I've frightened or bothered you."

"At least you've got manners." Beth cleared her throat and laughed weakly. "I suppose that's important no matter what you're made of."

"You really are made of wood?" Jacob asked. "This ain't some crazy trick. Like on *Candid Camera*?"

"No, sir. It's not a trick." Sprokly smiled, the corners of her mouth widening, creasing upwards as if the wood had split. She sat back and drank the rest of her water. "Could I have some more, please? I'm pretty parched."

"We're about to have supper," Jacob's wife said, taking the glass. "Would you care to join us?"

Sprokly's mouth opened, but whatever the wooden girl was about to say never made it out.

Ker-thunk. Jacob didn't have to turn to know that sound. But he saw the wooden girl's eyebrows, brows that looked to be painted on yet still arched. He wanted to stare but it wouldn't have been good manners. Instead he followed her gaze. Walter again, crouched on the porch where he'd been the whole time. A wooden girl didn't matter; nothing mattered to the boy now that he was once more twirling that damned hubcap.

"What an interesting game!" Sprokly rose, took a step, and turned to Jacob. "Could I give it a try?" She smoothed her dress eagerly. "I mean, if it's all right after we eat."

Beth opened the screen door and held it. "I guess you'll want to wash up?"

"If it's not too much trouble," Sprokly said, still staring at the boy. "And if you have some Three-In-One oil, I'd be much obliged." She faced them then, and Jacob could swear her cheeks reddened. "A knee problem," Sprokly added. "My joints are metal, you know."

"Well how about that," Jacob choked back a crazy laugh.

Beth nodded, her eyes quickly meeting his, all the questions they briefly shared, forced into the back seat as she moved to Walter and reached out. "Time to come in, boy."

Walter never looked up. The boy shied away from his mother's hand, but put down the hubcap and climbed to his feet, eyeing the circular piece of metal as if it might sail into the sunset. Beth touched his arm but the boy jerked away, moving quickly into the house. Sprokly followed.

"Has the world gone crazy?" Beth whispered. "Or is it just us?"

"You offered the invite," Jacob reached for her hand as they started inside. "So you tell me."

"What else could I do?" Beth brushed his hand away and gently prodded Jacob ahead of her. "She's out here by herself. She's all alone."

A clear blue-gray moonlight made the world bright as day. Although it was Beth's turn, Jacob eased down into the porch swing. Walter was already up, of course. Neither night nor day mattered to the boy. Not when there was a hubcap to twirl, a stick to spin, a rock to rotate, or a pebble to flip. Walter crouched on the edge of the porch and gave the hubcap another twirl. Ker-thunk, the noise ground into Jacob's memory, a sound he'd heard for years now; it

had brought him out tonight to the porch Poor Beth was exhausted anyway

Walter had to be watched. So Jacob took it upon himself, as he often had, to sit up with the boy. They'd made the house safe as safe could be, but still, Walter might get into something, come across a rattler in the yard, perhaps, or simply wander off

Quarter after three; Jacob would need to be up and at 'em by five at the latest That well wouldn't drill itself, and if they didn't get more water soon, the whole damn ranch would up and blow away Even the Red River, which bordered his land, held scarcely enough water now to get his feet wet. Thirsty cattle never brought a good price

Not that Jacob could sleep anyway. A wooden girl, a living wooden girl, lay stretched out on their old sofa. And if that didn't beat all, when Jacob had tip-toed through the parlor to come outside, he couldn't help but notice the wooden girl snored Jacob chuckled and grinned "Kind of gives new meaning to that old expression of sawing logs."

Ker-thunk, was how Walter answered. Not that Jacob expected anything more. He just felt like talking. Ranching in West Texas was hard enough, complicated enough, that the addition of the broken boy had made life almost intolerable Add a wooden girl Of course he needed someone to talk to Poor old Walter was all he had.

"Well, boy," Jacob leaned back, the porch swing creaking as his weight shifted, "what do you think of our guest?" She seemed likable enough—if a body could get past her being wood. Good manners meant someone had raised her right. Or, Jacob grinned again, at least built her right She'd even apologized to Beth after adding a dash of Three-In-One to her biscuits. Poor Beth had almost dropped the pan. Jacob had almost choked.

"Ain't he gonna answer you, Mr. Parker?" a voice asked, softly

ornery is all And she run off when she was eighteen Said she was gonna meet that Jerry Lee Lewis I guess that's why Grampser is so worried about me He's afraid I'll turn out like she did." She looked up at him then, and damn if the moonlight didn't catch her eyes, if they didn't spark the way a real person's did. "But I'm not like her. I just want to do what's right."

"Well," Jacob allowed, "that's a good thing."

"Thank you, sir." Sprokly smiled at him. "So them goddamn doctors, what did they tell you?"

Jacob smiled. Here was a young-un so well raised that she had to practice her swearing. He watched her grin broaden as if she were proud she'd pulled it off right. But he came back to the question and the smile left his face. He leaned forward, clasped his hands on his knees, and stared at the dusty floor "They said it was this syndrome kind of thing." His fist abruptly slammed into the porch swing's rail "And damn it...," he went on. "It's what they

"What did they say?" Sprokly put her hand on his arm, as gentle a touch as any human girl. "Please tell me."

"They said we caused it." Jacob couldn't help it; he buried his face in his hands "That it was something we did to Walter. Something had we must have done before he was even three."

"Oh my lord," Sprokly murmured. "Like what?"

"They couldn't even say!" Jacob half shouted, half rose from the swing. He got hold of himself then and forced himself down. When he looked at her, it seemed the moonlight had moistened her eyes. He looked down quickly at his boots, then over at the boy. Walter was holding up the hubcap so that the moonlight shone on his face, almost as motionless as a mannequin.

"You know what that's like?" He whispered, voice hoarse "To bring a child into this world and then ruin him, make him into some-

Marks glowed upon her cheeks, squiggles like words in an unknown language shimmered upon the bare wood of her arm.

muted from inside the house. The screen door opened and Sprokly came out. "Can I sit with you?"

Jacob shifted to the end of the porch swing and gestured at the empty side. "Sure you can. Kind of late for a young-un to be up though."

Sprokly took the place beside him. Jacob noticed an easiness to her movements that hadn't been there this afternoon. Yet, even in the moonlight he could certainly tell she was wood.

"I'll have you know I'm nearly seventeen, sir," Sprokly said primly. "At least the way our family counts birthdays."

Was her whole family wooden? How would they count birthdays? Jacob opened his mouth, but Sprokly leaned forward, clasped her hands, and said in a serious, adult tone, or at least the tone younguns used when they tried to act adult, "Your son now, he don't talk at all?"

"Nary a word in all his years." Jacob's voice grew hard. "The doctors in Dallas say he never will."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry." Sprokly looked down at her lap

"It ain't that." Jacob lifted a hand, but let it fall back on the rail of the porch swing. "It's them *goddamn* doctors." He got hold of himself then, wooden or not, she was still a woman and still company "Pardon my language."

"Oh that's all right." Sprokly shrugged. "Words are all we have. They make the universe, they even make us. My sister Marybeth, she swears all the time so I'm used to it."

"Is she wooden too?" Jacob couldn't help asking

Sprokly hunched her shoulders "Not so's you'd notice. She's just

thing that people laugh at. You know how it is to face other folks with that kind of sin on your hands?"

Sprokly shook her head. "You look tired, sir. Why don't you go back to bed now? I'll sit up with him."

"I'm worn out." Jacob stared down at his clenched fists. "And poor Beth, she's way past that and back again."

"I should think so."

The soft sweetness of her voice drew Jacob's eyes. Was that a tear trailing down her cheek, or just moonlight, highlighting the grains and whorls of wood? No, the longer he stared the more it seemed to swim into focus, a squiggle almost like a letter, yet it slipped down her cheek, vanishing in the moonlit glow

"Go on now." Sprokly rose, took his hand, and drew him to his feet. "Go get you some rest."

"You don't know how he is," Jacob started

But Sprokly led him to the screen door. "It'll be all right. I helped raise my cousins. I can handle him."

"But—"

Sprokly put a finger to her lips "Hush," she whispered. "Don't wake your wife."

Tired even beyond his years, Jacob slumped into the house The day's heat still within closed around him, but tonight it seemed soothing rather than stifling

"I wonder if that's how Grampser feels about me," Sprokly's murmur drifted in from the porch.

Jacob paused, turning to stare out at her Perhaps it was the screen door between them, perhaps a trick of the moonlight that did some-

thing strange to her profile. Marks glowed upon her cheeks, squiggles like words in an unknown language shimmered upon the bare wood of her arm. Had they been there all along? Jacob wondered or did the moonlight bring them out?

Words make us what we are, he remembered her saying.

"Come on, Walter. Show me what you see in the moonlight." She stepped off the porch and disappeared.

Jacob blinked, strange glowing squiggles rippled beneath his eyelids. He shook his head and opened his eyes, found a smile of sorts on his lips. He listened a moment longer but only to the soft chorus of crickets and cicadas. Sighing, he started for the bedroom, squares of moonlight patching the way across the worn linoleum floor.

Jacob lurched up in bed, awakened instantly by the slap, slap, slapping on their sheet metal roof. Glancing out the window, the dawn early and dark, he could just make out the pancake-sized shadows tumbling down from the sky—spinning, twirling, hitting the ground in dusty puffs before they darted off.

"What on earth?" Beth rolled over and sat up beside him. Her gray hair tousled, her hand clutching the front of her threadbare nightgown. "What's Walter doing now?"

"It ain't the boy." Jacob pushed away the carefully patched bed sheet, climbed out, and struggled into his jeans.

"Are those horned toads?" Beth stared out the window. His wife stumbled from the bed and grabbed her robe. "First a wooden girl and now this?"

"The world's gone crazy," Jacob allowed.

Sprokly wasn't on the couch when he stumbled through the parlor to the front door. Nor was she on the porch. Jacob stepped out

mouthed with strangers, he didn't see any need to change. "Who?"

"Her father's daughter," it said.

"The apple of her Grampser's eye," one of the horned toads scattered upon the porch added. And a good many more grumbled their agreement.

"Who wants to know?" Jacob demanded. Damned if he'd be put in his place by an uppity lizard.

"He Who Made Us All!" The horned toad in his hand said. The others abruptly took it up, a tin-voiced choir.

"He Who Made Us All."

"Who scribed the life within'nnn us!"

"That we may help him gatheeer."

"All secrets not yet known."

Maybe he was still in bed, Jacob decided. But the fingers that suddenly clutched his shoulder were all too real. He turned. The horned toad in his hand glared in the same direction.

"Jacob," Beth's face was pale and strained. "Walter's not in his room!"

"Mornin', ma'am," the horned toad said.

"Mm ..." Beth nodded politely, turned away, and staggered over to the sofa. She sat down, gripped the cushions, and squeezed her eyes shut.

"Excuse me," Jacob said to the horned toad.

"I will iffen you'll put me down."

Reasonable enough. Jacob inched the screen door open and returned the horned toad to the others on the porch.

"There's a barn out back," one said.

"I'll bet they're hiding her in the house," another added.

"We can't let her fool us again.

"That's rude," the horned toad said, the voice somewhere between a screech and a croak. "Close me up."

side, still barefoot, mind you, and stopped dead in his tracks. Hundreds of red head eyes stared up at him. Horned toads, but like none he'd ever seen and he'd seen his share. Not brown like they should be, but black, almost only looking almost like charred pancakes. They'd gathered on the porch. Others scurried across the yard, dashing every which way. The slap, slap, slapping on the roof continued unabated. Before he could close the screen door, one tried to climb over his foot.

He reached down and picked it up. It twisted in his fingers, trying to dig the two knobby horns on the back of its head into his thumb. Having grown up with horned toads, Jacob knew what to do. Easy as you please, he flipped it onto its back. His forefinger extended to stroke its belly. That should have put the critter to sleep. Instead the belly clicked open like a pocket watch.

Jacob stared at the tiny cogs and gluttering springs within. The horned toad meanwhile glared at him, its mouth opened and a crimson tongue licked the horny ridges of its jaw.

"That's rude," the horned toad said. the voice somewhere between a screech and a croak. "Close me up."

Mind suddenly adrift like a man in a dream, Jacob's fingers trembled as he pushed the leathery covering back into place.

"That's better," the horned toad said. "Now, is she here?"

Jacob's mouth fell open. The uneasy stillness that he'd felt yesterday when the wooden girl arrived slowly filled his gut again. "What?" he finally managed.

"You heard me, I didn't stutter," the horned toad rasped. "Is she here?"

It wasn't hard to connect the dots, but Jacob was normally close-

Jacob made sure to latch the screen door. He started for the bedroom and his boots, dimly aware that Beth followed.

"Are we fevered?" His wife grabbed the back of his shirt and pulled him to her.

Jacob took her into his arms, and then put a hand on her forehead. "You feel right enough to me."

"It's worse than I thought then." His wife gazed up at the roof where the slap, slap, slapping continued. "What should I do?"

"How the hell should I know?" Jacob shrugged away from her, found his boots, and pulled them on. "I'll check the barn."

It wasn't uncommon for the boy to slip out there. Jacob had long ago learned to lock up anything dangerous. Tools, the spare gas can, fertilizer sacks, insecticides, everything that might cause harm was padlocked in a storage room. Still, a tired man was a careless man. Had he forgotten to put anything away?

Horned toads clustered by the back door. He stepped carefully past them, between them, and heard some surprisingly vulgar language when a couple didn't manage to get out of his way. One glance at the barn was enough. The door was closed and normally this time of year, he kept it open. The horned toad rain had tapered off, but he held his hands over his head and tried to tip-toe to the barn.

"Walter?" he called out as he lifted the latch and eased his way into a dimness that smelled of dust and dry hay. "You in here, boy?" Not that he expected an answer. "Walter?"

"He's in the loft," a voice hissed. "And close the door. Please!"

Jacob waited until his eyes adjusted to the semi darkness, and then slipped the latch into place. He looked around and found a shape huddled in the back atop a stack of hay bales. "Miss Sprokly? Is that

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you?"

"Sssshhh " The wooden girl glared at him, her arms wrapped around her legs Her shoulders hunched and as fierce a frown upon her face as any real person's scowl. "Don't let on that I'm here "

"There she is," a tiny voice rasped from the shadows.

"Shit," Sprokly muttered Then she sighed, stretched out, and clumbed from the bales "Sorry, Mister Parker Please pardon my language "

"It's excusable on a morning like this," Jacob allowed "Now where's Walter and what's going on?"

"He's fine," Sprokly smoothed her dress, glared at the scuttling of tiny claws on wood still in the shadows, and folded her arms. "He's up in the loft But Mr. Parker .. "

"You understand all this?" Jacob waved his hand toward the outside. "There's horned toads falling from the sky, and they talk, and--"

"They're Grampser's," Sprokly replied. "He sent them to find me."

"He's coming for you, girl" A shadowy pancake skittered across the barn floor

"Shut up!" Sprokly shouted. She grabbed a fistful of straw and flung it at the creature, as petulant a gesture as Jacob had ever seen "Just shut up and leave me be!"

"Young-uns," the horned toad scoffed

Sprokly screamed, stamped a foot, and flung another handful of straw Jacob caught a last glimpse of the creature as it ducked beneath the barn door

"I'm sorry, Mr Parker," Sprokly said. "I didn't mean to bring all this down on you folks "

"Bring what down?" Jacob asked. "The horned toads?"

"More than that " Sprokly shook her head and slumped down on a bale. "Grampser's really private about our affairs. He's not gonna allow you and your family to remember any of this "

"What do you mean?"

"He's got ... ways to fix your mind. A gadget that will take away the memories that I've been here and such." Sprokly stared at the ground.

"He can do that?" Jacob asked, and then remembered who he was talking to and what kind of morning it had been

Sprokly nodded "He'll take away your memories, your wife's, and even Walter's Ain't no telling what else he might do."

A cold, aching anger welled up through Jacob. He stared at Sprokly and slowly shook his head "Wait now He ain't gonna touch that boy "

"Specially Walter," Sprokly rose and put a hand on his arm "Listen, I need to tell you something "

He jerked away from her, started for the ladder that led to the loft "Walter? You come down here now!"

"Mr Parker, wait!" Sprokly called. Her hand clutched the cuff of his jeans as he started up the ladder but he shook her off

"Please, I was just trying to help "

The first thing Jacob noticed when he climbed into the loft was that the floor had been neatly swept, the bales all pushed back against the slope of the roof The second thing he took in, letters, or at least they looked like letters, all formed from bits of straw, all surrounding Walter s damned old hubcap His eyes finally found the boy, squatting in a corner. Walter studied the floor, then ever so precisely picked up a piece of straw and slowly put it into place with the others

An early morning shaft of light cut through a crack in the wall, Jacob halted stock still He almost forgot to breathe And the anger, oh it burned like a high noon sun inside him. The boy squatted there naked as a jaybird. And every square inch of him was covered in letters Dark as India ink letters, with strange pictures that rippled when the boy moved and made Jacob's eyes ache

"What have you done?" He roared, glaring back down the ladder at the upturned wooden face "How " Words failed him He hurried to the boy Walter ignored him as usual, picked up another piece of straw, and started to place it with the others.

"We got to get you down " Jacob grabbed the boy's arm, fighting not to stare at the strange squiggles that rippled along Walter's biceps He jerked the boy up.

Walter grunted, scowling down at Jacob's hand, but allowed himself to be dragged along Jacob pushed the boy at the ladder, and Walter slowly started down

"You better be gone, girl" Jacob shouted so loudly that Walter winced. "Cause if I catch you, I'll tear you apart for what you done here "

"I was just trying to help him," Sprokly cried. Jacob heard a sob, the clump of wood across the barn floor By the time he managed to get Walter down, the damned wooden girl was gone

"Good riddance," Jacob muttered. He turned to the boy What on earth had their so-called guest been up to? She'd even shaved Walter's head, covered it with squiggles too. He took the boy's arm once more, still staring at the open door "Come on. Let's get you cleaned up and dressed."

If Walter noticed, he gave no sign, face unchanging, the same thoughtful yet blank look he always had. But the boy didn't fight or jerk away when Jacob pulled him to the house. The horned toads, too, had vanished

For the twentieth time Wednesday morning Jacob stomped out on the porch, balled his fists, and dared that damned wooden girl to appear. All Tuesday he and Beth had worked on Walter, scrubbing brushing, and scrubbing again Nothing, not even alcohol, not even kerosene had taken the marks off the boy's skin They'd bathed Walter until the holding tank ran dry

And until Walter would no longer put up with it, but screamed himself into a tantrum that left Beth in tears Jacob had been forced to hold the boy down, had endured the clawing and biting Walter hadn t done since he was twelve

He glared down at the boy rubbed absently at the scratches on his arm Walter squatted in the dirt now, playing with bits of straw and dried grass, lining them up, making squiggles in the dust. The boy'd been at it since sunrise and had covered half the yard

Funny, Jacob realized, the chickens who usually wandered this way and that pecking and milling as chickens did, well, they'd gathered outside the hen house now staying away from Walter's squiggles

The screen door squeaked and Beth came out to stand with him. "I made you some eggs," she said.

Jacob shook his head. "Not hungry."

"Don t let it bother you no more." Beth put a hand on his arm. "The boy's not hurt "

"Why'd she do that?" Jacob clenched his fists "We treated her respectful We fed her supper " He gazed into his wife's care-lined face, into her tired but kind eyes. "Why'd she want to make fools of us? And picking on the boy, that's just--"

Beth put a finger to his lips "She told you she was just trying to help "

"How," Jacob growled. "By making him stranger than he already is?"

"Who knows what wooden people think?" Beth took his fist, eased his fingers open, and held it with both hands "Come eat your eggs," she said gently. "They won't be good cold."

They heard something then. A beat-up old pickup, one that had been red once, bumped across the cattle guard and chugged up the road. It halted when it reached the yard, the engine coughed a couple of times and died

"Company again," Beth murmured.

"Take the boy inside " Jacob moved to the edge of the porch. Beth went to Walter, took his hand, but the boy wouldn't stand Walter grunted, pulled away from his mother, and returned to his dusty squiggles. Beth spread her hands, a helpless look on her face. Jacob shrugged, mindful of yesterday's tantrum

An elderly man in overalls and battered Stetson got out of the truck and limped toward him. Jacob recognized him, had seen him at the feed store in Quanah before it burned down. "Morning, folks."

Jacob nodded. "Morning."

"Ebenezer Maezel." The old man offered a leathery, calloused hand.

Jacob shook it, nodding once more at the good firmness of the grip. "Jacob Parker." He cocked his head toward his family. "My wife Beth, and that's Walter."

Ebenezer Maezel took off his Stetson, revealing thin gray white hair and a well-tanned scalp. He held his hat in both hands and smiled. "Folks, I've come to take my granddaughter home."

"Oh?" Jacob answered.

"Come now, Mr. Parker." The elder Maezel's smile thinned a little. "You know who I mean."

the road in the wind.

Jacob tumbled back, slammed against a porch rail. The wind smacked him like a freight train.

"Get in the house!" Beth shouted. "Just get in the house."

Above the roaring wind came a cackle, a shriek of laughter like a lunatic on moonshine. Walter! The boy still squatted by the porch, twig in hand, seemingly untouched. Walter grinned and it hit Jacob harder than the wind. The boy stared right into his eyes. Walter looked down and Jacob realized the boy's squiggles remained clear and undisturbed.

"That ain't very polite." Maezel gestured, his hand out, finger moving like he was writing in the air. Abruptly the wind vanished. Dirt and debris hung in the air for a heartbeat before dropping straight to the ground.

Jacob climbed to his feet and found the elder Maezel smiling as

> "He don't look where most folks look. So he sees things most miss. Marvelous thing sometimes and he gets lost in them."

"Your granddaughter made of wood?" Jacob asked.

"That would be the one," the old man chuckled. "I hope she ain't caused you fine folks no trouble."

"She hasn't," Beth spoke up. Jacob glanced her way. His wife stood between Maezel and the boy, her arms folded, her expression polite but poker-faced.

"Then you admit she's here," the old man demanded.

"Never said she wasn't." Jacob shook his head and frowned. "But she ain't here now."

Maezel rubbed a whiskery jaw and stared at the ground. "Maybe you don't understand," he said at last. "This is hard on me. Painful. I made her, you see. Brought her into this world. Her pa and ma, they can't have children." He fixed a faded blue-eyed gaze upon Jacob, a gaze so intense Jacob felt it all the way to the back of his head. "We had high hopes for the girl. But Sprokly's changing, she don't listen no more. She won't do what she's told. We can't figure out what's going wrong. You don't know how that feels."

"Your granddaughter was here." Jacob's jaw tightened. "But like I said, she's gone now. She left yesterday."

"It's a bad situation when neighbors get to fussing." Maezel folded his arms. "I really don't want that."

"Neither do we," Jacob allowed.

"Mr. Parker," Maezel said, a hardness creeping into his voice. "I believe Sprokly's in your barn there. I can feel her watching us right now."

"That ain't so." Jacob shook his head.

"Well then," Maezel's voice grew nasty. "You don't mind if I have a look."

"I do mind," Jacob growled. "When someone comes to call and makes me out a liar on my own property?"

"We'll see about that." Maezel pulled something from the bib of his overalls. Jacob couldn't make out what it was at first. Then he remembered Sprokly's talk about a memory gadget. This one glinted like glass. The shine off it caught Jacob's eye, held it, drew his gaze deeper and deeper. Far, far away he heard Beth gasp. Even the chickens ceased their clucking.

Dust! Dirt! Wind! Everywhere, a sandstorm sudden as a heart attack. Jacob blinked, shook his head, and grimaced as grit scoured his face. Seemed like it had come up out of nothing, right out of the ground.

"What in tarnation?" Maezel shouted, dropping his gadget, staggering as he sought to protect his eyes, his hat flying away toward

he dusted himself off. He picked up his gadget, gave Jacob a long measuring look, and then slipped it into his overalls. His hand reached out and his hat rose from the ground and sailed into his fingers.

"Seems my granddaughter taught your boy a thing or two," Maezel said.

"She marked all over him." Jacob nodded. "I guess you taught her how to do that?"

"Taught her most everything," Maezel stepped past Jacob, over to the boy. He stared down at the straw squiggles, lips moving silently. "One thing I damn sure didn't teach her was to go messin' with other peoples' lives."

"Liar!" A voice shrieked from the hen house. A heartbeat later Sprokly's head appeared in its low, dark doorway. The chickens scattered as she crawled out, stood, and ran a wooden hand through her hair. "You done more than mess with folks' lives. You know you did."

The old man stared at Jacob long and hard. "I reckon you was telling the truth," he finally muttered, folding his arms. "Damned horned toads insisted she was in the barn. She up and fooled them—again."

"What's this really about, Mr. Maezel?" Beth asked, stepping up beside her son.

The elderly man opened his mouth, but it was Sprokly, still brushing chicken feathers from her dress, who answered. "He took some life from the folks in Quanah."

"Life?" Jacob asked.

"More like the living spirit of the town," Maezel allowed.

"It was a tricky thing how he did it." Tears flowed freely down the girl's face. "But he stole it just the same."

"You wanted to be a real girl," Maezel's voice rose.

"I know that, Grampser." Sprokly drew a forearm across her tears. The rasp of wood grating wood made the chickens flinch. "But it weren't fair to do that. You taught me not to steal too, but that's what you did!"

"So she tried to fix it," Maezel said. "To make a long story short, by burning down the feed store."

"It was you who did that?" Beth gasped and squeezed Jacob's arm. Jacob stared at the girl. The loss of the feed store had hurt the town badly.

"Cause of what he put in the seeds." Sprokly waved an arm at Maezel. "It weren't a poison really but once them seeds was planted,

they would have sucked away the town's life."

"Only a bit that they'd never miss," Maezel's voice came close to a shout. "I keep telling you that."

"I had to make it right," Sprokly sobbed. "But I'm not real now and I ain't just wood either." She stared up at Jacob, her face stark. "I don't know what I am."

"Whatever you are, you're coming home with me," Maezel said. "Right damn now, girl. You've caused enough trouble." He started forward, fists balled.

"Hell no," Sprokly glared at him, stamping a foot in the dry dust.

The way the air wrinkled up and flickered around the two hurt Jacob's eyes. It wasn't his nature to meddle. But some things in this world could be fixed and some couldn't. There was only one way to tell which was which.

As the elderly man stomped past him, Jacob reached out and gripped Maezel's arm. The old man grinned, his hand made a quick squiggle on Jacob's wrist. A numbness oozed through Jacob's arm and it dropped to his side. Maezel started past.

It was Beth then, bless her heart, who stepped in front of Sprokly. "She makes you hurt, Mr. Maezel, in ways most folk can't imagine."

"I don't—" Maezel lifted a hand.

Arm still tingling, Jacob moved to his wife's side. "You wake up scared and go to bed scared. And always there's thoughts a clawing at the back of your mind. What did you do wrong? How'd you come to mess up a child you loved so much?"

The old man stared at them. Finally, shoulders slumping, he sighed. "Ya'll know more about things than I thought." He shook his head and sniffed. A tear trailed down his weathered cheek. "I don't know how to fix her."

"Then give her some time," Jacob said.

"Let her stay here a night or two," Beth offered. "We'll bring her back. Just let her sort herself out. Young-uns need that."

The elderly Maezel rubbed his jaw. After a moment, he looked at his granddaughter. "If I let you stay, will you listen to these folks?"

Sprokly nodded, twining her hands together.

"You won't go nowhere else?" Maezel asked. "You won't run away again?"

"No, sir." Sprokly stared at the ground.

"At least I'll know you're all right, girl." Maezel leveled his gaze at Jacob, a tired smile on his lips. "Why don't ya'll come for Sunday dinner." Without another word he went back to his truck, got in, and slammed the door. The truck started, pulled a tight turn, and trundled away. The vehicle vanished over the rise, hidden by the mesquite and cactus of the chaparral. Jacob was still staring at its dust cloud when Beth took his arm. It felt better now, just a mild tingle like it had gone to sleep and woke up on its own.

"Maybe you should go inside and wash up," Beth said to Sprokly.

"I do look a sight," Sprokly sniffed, a weak smile on her wooden lips.

"Now hold on." Jacob turned to the girl, looked her up and down, and frowned. "We need to talk about what you done to Walter first."

Sprokly stared at her feet, her hands behind her back. "I'm sorry about that," she said at last. "I was so grateful for you taking me in and all, you know, treating me like I was a real person. I thought I could fix him."

"So you marked all over him?" Jacob shook his head. They all looked at Walter, watched as the boy smiled happily and drew another squiggle in the dirt. Suddenly Walter looked up, grinning at the sky, and giggled.

"He don't look where most folks look," Sprokly said. "So he sees things most miss. Marvelous things sometimes and he gets lost in them. All the marks do is give him a path back to you." She looked up at Jacob then, and he could tell it was hard for her to meet his eyes.

"The marks will fade in a few days when the full moon comes," she added. "He'll look normal then."

Jacob nodded. "Don't be messing with him no more. You promise?"

"Yes, sir." Sprokly sniffed.

"Let's get you cleaned up now, girl." Beth put an arm around Sprokly and they started for the house.

She looked different, Jacob suddenly realized. Something about her had changed. She was still the color of bleached mahogany, but she didn't look like wood. The grains and whorls had vanished. Beth whispered something and the girl giggled. Soft laughter, yet as real as any young-un's and chock full of life.

Moments later, a happy Bob Wills song, "Roly Poly," filled their home. Jacob saw to the chickens, made sure the hen house hadn't been damaged by that sudden wind, and then went to check the barn.

Beth had come out on the porch when he got back. His wife stood silently, arms folded, watching Walter.

"I'd best try to get some work done," Jacob said. "That well won't get itself dug. There's a third-hand windmill over in Childress we can buy for next to nothing."

"The price is right." Beth smiled at him, but then turned her gaze to the sky. "Well looky there."

A rain drop hit Jacob in the eye. Where had the clouds come from? Before the windstorm the sky had been clear.

Beth took his hand. The rain started coming down, harder but not too hard. Thunder rumbled in the distance and the clouds grew thicker, darker, the kind of thunderstorm found only in deep Texas summers, the kind that signaled an end to a drought.

"This'll fill the stock pond," Jacob laughed. "Buys us a bit of time, woman."

"Maybe you can rest some," Beth said, grinning. "You been looking awful tired lately."

"We both could use a break."

"P-P, P, Pa?"

Jacob and his wife turned. A sopping wet Walter stood behind them, running a hand along his naked scalp, brushing water from squiggles and marks the color of moonlight on old chrome. "Pa?" the boy said again, his face frowning with effort, lips puckered ever so precisely. "You like the rain, Pa?"

"Oh my lord," Beth murmured, her eyes wide as wide could get.

Jacob swallowed a lump the size of a chicken egg, stared at his boy, then finally croaked out, "Yes, Walter. I like the rain. I like it very much."

The boy grinned and then turned his face to the cool summer shower. "I m-made it for you."

"Oh my lord," Beth said again, squeezing Jacob's fingers. She blinked rain, or perhaps tears, from her eyes as she stared at her child. "You know, it's been some kind of week."

"But today beats everything," Jacob finally managed. Monday they'd met a wooden girl. Tuesday, it had rained horned toads.

"Today our son talked," he said.

"Today our son talked," Beth agreed. She touched Walter's cheek and for a change their son didn't pull away. "She done the boy some good."

Jacob couldn't have kept the grin off his face if he'd tried. "Where's she at?"

"Inside, doing dishes." Beth glanced at the house. "I think if we talk to her, give her time to be with normal folks and see what we're like. I think that might help her."

"She just needs what she gave our son," Jacob allowed. "Her own path back."

"A p-path to Sunday," Walter said, still struggling with the words.

"What's that, son?" Jacob asked. But Walter turned away once more. He crouched beside his hubcap again, which was upside down now, and filled with rain. His hand reached out, forefinger extended, and drew a long broad squiggle in the water. What was it? Jacob wondered. Could it be a smile? ❧

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The White Isle

Humans can be hard to understand sometimes. Love can be even harder, especially if you're not actually human. BY VON CARR ILLUSTRATION BY [illegible]

-1-

For as long as she could remember, the girl had played in the white oval nursery that overlooked the sea. She had a doll made of seaweed that sang mournful songs when the wind blew, and a glowing stone that cast fearsome shadows on the wall. Under her bed she kept a shoebox full of fingernails, to sink ships with.

On summer days she leaned against the turquoise glass of her window and made faces at the gray seagulls that wheeled and screamed on the wind. At night the seagulls roosted on the window ledge, and left it caked with droppings and fish blood. Sometimes she woke to find they had arranged a strange collection of objects against the glass: a piece of torn velvet, a coal-black flute, a gold necklace, the knucklebones of a drowned sailor, a broken compass. Whether they brought these objects as gifts, or simply to furnish their own nests, the girl was never able to tell.

One day she woke up to the sound of the seagulls screaming in fury. She went to the window, and saw, to her great astonishment, a tiny figure staggering across the rocks below. The girl had never seen anyone but the seagulls and her own misty reflection in the glass, unless the twisting shadows cast by her stone belonged to people. She fled to the back of her chamber and stood trembling against the curved wall, her seaweed doll clutched to her chest. Eventually she worked up the courage to creep back to the window, and peer out.

The figure had disappeared. The girl collapsed on the floor, a sudden heaviness on her that she did not recognize as disappointment.

She waited all night by the window, looking down at the rocks. She did not quite know what she was waiting for, save that something gnawed at her mind and made her see shadows on the rocks when there were none.

The next morning, she came to a decision, almost without realizing she had made one. She picked up a fishbone the seagulls had left her and scratched a door on the blankest of her blank walls. And when the door was finished, she opened it and stepped through.

Her first thought was that the sun was brighter here, outside the tower. Light was everywhere, and she could not get away from it. She closed her eyes, but the sun glared through her lids, illuminating the red glow of blood she had not, until this point, known she possessed.

This was fascinating. She studied it for a time, turning her blind head to track the weird echoes of the gulls. And then she opened her eyes again, and saw the tower perched above her on the beach, as white and inscrutable as the bones the seagulls had left on her windowsill. It looked smaller from the outside.

There was a noise on the rocks below, a sound that belonged to neither the gulls nor the ocean. This reminded her why she had left the tower in the first place. She went in search of it, scrambling over rocks cracked by sunlight and scarred with the ancient rings of barnacles. And above the tideline, in the gap formed between one of the largest rocks and the bleached skeleton of a storm-tossed tree, she found a man.

The man was a huddle of bones and rags. He smelled like salt and rotten fish and kelp left in the sun. When he did not move she crept up and pushed him with her foot, to see if he would fall over.

He didn't. He might have, if his back had not been pressed so firmly against the tree trunk. Instead he flailed like a wounded bird and made "mu, mu" sounds that alarmed her. She ran along the tideline, sending the gulls shrieking and wheeling in broken white clouds, until she was sure the man was not following her.

She avoided the man for a night and a day, exploring instead the high tide marks of the island's rocky beach. She found the remains of a dock on the lee of the island, and a pile of skulls heaped around a broken spear which in better days would have trailed a red witch-flag. But none of these objects meant anything to her. They were, like the man on the beach and like the purple starfish that clung to the insides of the deepest tidepools, curiosities only. They stopped existing for her the moment she turned her head.

But the man would not let her forget him so easily. He made coughing noises at her when she scampered over the rocks above him. And once, when she was investigating a strange piece of glass that had washed up in a nest of seaweed, he tossed a pebble at her. This was intolerable. She clambered up the tideline, her bare feet scaled with sand, and screamed at him like the gulls did.

"Water," the man croaked. He'd sailed all of the spice routes and done some slavework in the twisted coast, so he knew the word in fourteen tongues. He used them all: "water, étraile, skasti, jana

She did not notice the sailor's death for another few days, she noticed his unnatural stillness, but thought perhaps that he was frightened of her, the way small fish were when her shadow passed over them. Then one day she saw that his body had slumped out of its resting place and that the gulls were tugging at it. She threw rocks at them, but the body did not move, and the gulls kept coming back. This disturbed her.

She crept back into her nursery, leaving black footprints on the white floor, and curled at the base of her window. The room seemed much smaller now.

Something had come loose inside her and rattled in the surge of each breath. She did not know what it was, save that it involved the creature that had croaked at her and died on the rocks. It was unsettling. She wanted it to go away.

But the feeling did not depart, at least not entirely. The girl paced around her shrinking room, year after year, searching for something she could not quite articulate. In a different story, you see, she would have saved the sailor and he would have taken her back to civilization, and they might, after all, have been happy. But the dice did not roll that way. The girl remained by herself, growing older and no wiser, waiting for her life to begin.

– 2 –

That which does not break you makes you stranger. In the case of the girl in the tower, she took to staring at the ocean for long periods of time, waiting for — what? Something. A chance to rectify a mistake she still did not know she'd made. She grew thinner with each passing season (an odd thing, since she neither ate nor drank). Her eyes glittered like storm-slick rocks in the moonlight, and the gulls no longer came to call at her windowsill. They were afraid of her now.

Then, one night, she saw it: a blot of white on the horizon. A white movement that was neither gull nor surf. She watched it, waiting, until the lightning lit the clouds and she saw the sloop, its sails torn, driven toward the rocks.

She picked up the shoebox full of fingernails and stirred it, thinking. Normally the ships she sank were distant things, mere shapes on the horizon. This creature was closer. It thrashed on the surf; it was real.

So she slid the shoebox back under her bed and walked out onto the rocky beach. The storm waters were high, the foam reached even to the base of her tower, and the north side of the island was completely awash. She waded down into the grip of the waves, which

The witchgirl listened to the shipwrecked man's promises with a gaze as blank and pitiless as the ocean.

searching for the one that would make the shrieking child understand his plight. But the girl understood all of his words and none of them. Being witch-bred, she felt neither hunger nor thirst.

"Yes, water, water, go back to it," she screamed in the language of gulls, *"swim away, this is my place here."* The sailor, being but an ordinary human, did not understand her. He croaked his request until he could no longer speak, and then he watched her for a while longer, hoping despite everything that she would save him.

The girl did not see the sailor die. She was at that moment scrambling in one of the deeper tidepools, trying to reach the pale green anemones that prickled and shrank back from her prodding fingers

pushed at her and tried to drag her out into the storm. Perhaps if she had been less fearsome they would have succeeded, but she was witchborn, baffled and angry. The waves drew back, muttering, and she trekked down to the distant line of rocks where she'd last seen the defiant furl of sail, the black water retreating before her.

She was uncertain now, it had never before occurred to her to fear the sea. It was strong, the ocean. Her bare legs shivered still from the icy clasp of the waves. She heard the hunger of the ocean around her and knew its retreat was reluctant, perhaps only temporary. It wanted her the way she wanted the purple starfish dropped by gulls and the things that glittered in the turn of pebbles on the beach. She

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was novelty; she was a toy, and it would kill her casually, for its own amusement, if she let it.

So she kept her eyes on the waves and measured her steps carefully, down to the rocks where the sail had snagged. It gleamed pale and wet, like the underbelly of a fish. And there, in a tangle of ropes and wood was a hand much like her own, five-fingered and pale

It did not occur to her that the shipwrecked man would be too heavy for her to lift, so she carried him over the storm slick rocks into the tower that was her sanctuary, and she put him down in a room she had thought of just for this purpose, an amber room full of shadows and light, that flickered like lightning over the waves. She watched him breathe while the storm broke its strength on the rocks below and eventually slunk exhausted back across the horizon.

Men who have been rescued from certain death generally do not think to question their surroundings The shipwrecked man was no exception He woke with the dawn on the second day, and gasped for water. She brought him some—first the brackish water of the lower tidepools, cupped in a great clamshell, and then, when he spat it out she listened to his requests for fresh water and brought him the freshest she knew of—the rainwater that had collected at the foot of her tower. This the man drank, and thanked her for

He then asked her name and the name of the land he had come to She stared at him blankly From this, and from her earlier mistake with the water, he gathered that she was simple, and he thanked the ninth god, the patron of children and fools, for coming to his deliverance

As for the witchgirl, she brought the man what he asked for, and watched him closely, and repeated back the words that he said to her. She had been born knowing all the tongues uttered by man and beast and at least two languages that had never been uttered at all But the desires of mortals were strange to her. She did not under stand why the man wanted rainwater, or fish, or the name of the island he'd washed up upon But she supposed he was like the previous man, a pampered beast who would pine and disappear if she did not satisfy his whims.

So she brought him clamshells full of water, and the fish the tide sent her The name of the island was harder to find, for it had not occurred to her that things had names She asked the man what a name was, and he (admiring her simplicity) said it was the word a person called himself, or gave to another thing so he could know it apart from others of its kind. Privately, she thought this was foolish—one gull was much like another, after all. But she wished to please him, so she went to the ridge of the island and stretched her thoughts down into the rocks, and asked it what it called itself

Like her, the island was puzzled by the question It was an island—it saw no need to call itself anything. But reaching back through its memories, it recalled that the men who had landed on its shores in the past had insisted on naming it. The sailor who had been marooned on its shores called it the Wreck of All Hopes, the man who had buried his daughter on the lee side of the island had thought of it ever after as Cailtai's Island; and the sailors who had built the dock in its lee called it the Rock of Gulls. There were more names too, for everyone who had staggered onto its shore or bled on its rocks had called it something, even if the word was only a curse

She took this information back to the man, but he did not seem to hear her. He took the stones she told to mean the island had no name, when in fact it had many. He talked of naming it after his father, a great man in a distant kingdom. He described cities to her, and golden palaces, and gardens that hung with flowers. The witchgirl watched his hands move as he spoke and listened with interest to the shapes and sound of his words But when he spoke of cities and palaces she thought only of rocky beaches and the shadows her rock threw on walls These were the world to her She knew no other.

As the days stretched into each other the man grew more animated. He walked around the island, asking questions the girl could not answer He ran his hands over the strange white stones of the tower and talked excitedly of the people who might have constructed it. He took the broken wood from the old pier and laid it in stacks on the north side of the island, stacks which he burned to create dark columns of smoke that climbed reluctantly into the strange blue gleam of the sky

His father, he told the witchgirl, was a wealthy man. Somewhere, over the horizon, ships were looking for him. Soon they would come to the island, drawn by the smoke that sent the seagulls gliding around the pyre in anxious circles Once back on board a ship the man would give her many things—dresses the color of the sun and moon, jewels as big as her fist, servants to scrape and bow to her She was (he told her) a princess of the sea, and deserved to be treated like one

The witchgirl listened to the shipwrecked man's promises with a gaze as blank and pitiless as the ocean. It is difficult to say how much she understood of his wandering speeches. She understood the words, but not the way they were put together, or the meaning behind them

Certainly when he spoke of making her his wife she smiled vaguely, which he took as her assent. But her thoughts were with the tidewater, curling around keels in dark passages She understood him the way the gulls did, the way the island did, which is to say she did not see what he had to do with her at all

– 3 –

One day the witchgirl's attention was snagged by the sound of the man shouting on the beach She was thinking, at that moment, of the slow dreams of whales, which brushed up against her mind from time to time The whales did not live like the gulls did, from meal to meal, but journeyed always to a promised place just beyond the horizon. None of the whales had ever seen this place, but they believed in it nonetheless, they sang mournful songs about its absence and hopeful songs about its future discovery In that respect they reminded the witchgirl of the shipwrecked man Like the whales, he was always speaking of places that did not exist.

"Cailtai!" the man called (She had told him that this was not her name, but he did not seem to have listened to her) "Cailtai, a sail!"

A sail. She thought of the white cloth that had washed ashore after the second shipwreck and conceded that this might be moderately interesting. She could, at the very least, speak to the sail and ask it what it thought of whales and men and the relation between them

When she joined the man on the beach she found him laughing and pointing to a shape on the horizon A ship, like the ones she had sunk when she was younger Her fingers twitched- part of her wished to sink this one too, purely out of habit But the excitement of the man stirred an old curiosity within her. She had never spoken with a ship, only the broken spars and pieces of things that had once been ships She had gleaned no useful information from them, only echoes of misery and confusion But a ship, a whole ship—why, that might tell her something interesting.

The men who brought the boat to land were sealers, bound for the carnage ice of the north Had they seen the smoke on their return journey, their ship would have smelled of blood and spoken in the broken screams of dying animals But the ship was clean; a new ship. built from pine, with a round hull to help escape the crush of ice When the witchgirl stepped onto its deck, it spoke only of hopes and expectations. So she stayed, feeling the ship shift eagerly underfoot, watching the men talk to each other of voyages and riches and other things that did not concern her.

The shipwrecked man—it might be worth sharing his name now, though the witchgirl never remembered it—the shipwrecked man was Asam Weavress, third son to Drai Weavress, the wealthiest merchant in Ir. Had he been a first son, he might have been raised to

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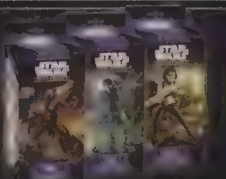

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think of practical things, like trade maps and rich wives. But Asam had been raised to the priesthood of the third god, when the high priest offended Asam's father by refusing to dedicate the winter sacrifice in his name, Asam had been withdrawn from the priesthood and sent to learn the management of warehouses. From here he had drifted into cheap trading, chasing bargains on impulse and whim, selling cut-rate goods at a profit (but more often a loss) in northern towns that could not usually afford such luxuries

Had Asam been raised to be first son, he might never arrived on the witchgirl's island. A more experienced trader would never have taken perishable cargo on board in a storm season, a less-educated man might not have dismissed the sailors' accounts of the strange creatures that lived on the shoals and the white tower that spelled death to any ship that sailed in its shadow

But Asam was only a third son, without much training or natural talent. He had not seen the danger then, and he did not see it now, as he stood on the deck of the ship negotiating for their passage

The witchgirl had saved him from the ocean. If, when he spoke, she seemed strangely distant, it was only because she had spent so much time alone, on this bare, dreary rock. She was beautiful, and obviously had some education, since she understood not only his language but every foreign word he had tried on her. She wore a necklace fit for a princess, and kept house in a white tower constructed in a style he did not recognize. She was, in short, a creature out of legend, a marooned princess, probably imprisoned by some cruel patriarch over prophecies that did not truly concern her.

Having not lived long in the world, Asam took most of his knowledge from courtly songs and stories. Had he lived longer, he might have heard other stories, like the ones the northcoasters tell of witchchildren born cold and dangerous, who can be neither broken nor burned nor drowned. He would have heard how the northcoasters always end these tales with the witchchildren burned alive or locked up in towers surrounded by running water.

The sealers had started early on their season, and therefore had no particular objection to taking on passengers for a brief voyage to the mainland, particularly if such a voyage would be amply rewarded. Three of them had sailed to it before, and one knew Asam by reputation, if not by sight. They did not think well of him, but they thought well of his father's money.

The witchgirl, though, was a different matter. The captain of the ship was a southern man willing to sail in sight of a white tower, but there were many northerners among his crew. They muttered when the landboat was sent to the island and muttered more when they saw the girl sitting at the prow of the boat, her hair black and tangled like seaweed, her eyes as calm as the sea after a storm. True, there was no red witchflag waving over this island (the winds had torn it down long ago), but there was strangeness here.

The southern captain remanded them of Asam's promised gold, and of the priest's mark he'd paid to have painted on to the mast in Jabul. Was not the mark supposed to bring them good fortune? Had not this fortune now appeared, in the form of a stranded merchant and his half-wit mistress? Who were they to question the will of the sea god?

In the end, the captain carried the argument, more through personality than words. He agreed that the girl should remain below decks for the remainder of the voyage, so as not to provoke the wind demons. To this, Asam also conceded, although he had some difficulty explaining it to his companion.

The witchgirl had no particular fear of darkness or cramped spaces, and there were many things to talk to in the cabin the captain provided them. She wove her thoughts into the woodgrain, listening to the tales each plank told of distant forests and the shrieks of trees.

There were rats as well, lean black creatures who considered themselves the prime citizens of the vessel. She tried to speak to them as she had done the gulls, but they hung back and observed her silently. Unlike men, rats know a witch when they see one. They discussed her arrival in whispered conferences and took to strewing the hold with red fibers they chewed from one of the captain's robes, to prevent her from listening in on their conversations. The captain cursed the rats and shook his head over their strange behavior. The sailors looked at each other in concern, and each read his own thoughts in the eyes of his mate. this is but the first sign.

Asam was happily oblivious to the crew's anxiety. As far as he was concerned, he had just escaped a dreary fate on the island, and had rescued his former savior into the bargain. He dedicated himself to educating her now, reading her verses from the captain's Inhentors' Scrolls and telling her about his land and his people. He imagined she watched him with eager interest, hanging on every word.

To the relief of both sailors and rats, the ship soon arrived in port. The journey had been swift, as the captain had promised. Asam was able to deliver on his promise too. Messengers were sent to his father, and a bird came back with better-than-hoped-for news. Two of Asam's brothers had died during his long absence, one killed by pirates, the other poisoned with fly-sickness. As third son, Asam's life was more valuable, and his father promised a handsome reward for his return.

Belowdecks, the witchgirl was finally bored of her new surroundings. The wood had run out of tales to tell her, and she had tired of the rats' suspicious gazes. So when the shipwrecked man returned to tell her it was time to leave, she did not notice his impertinence, but welcomed it as a suggestion.

She arrived on deck as imperious as any queen, unaware that there had been any attempt to confine her. Her hair was still tangled and wild—every comb Asam had tried to use on it had shattered, but he was still naive enough to blame the captain for his poor stock in combs. When she turned to survey the crew, even the captain shrank back from her gaze. It was not anger they read in her eyes, but blank indifference. None of them could have said why, in that moment, they were afraid, but as sailors they lived and died in the grasp of the ocean, and it was the ocean they recognized looking out of her eyes, powerful and pitiless and indifferent to anything smaller than itself.

Then the girl saw the city.

This was not the land she knew. Here there were colors and angles, a perfect gibberish of structures piled on top of each other, streets and houses and towers (none of which looked like her tower); a mazy motion of color, flags waving, boats rising on a greasy brown tide, cormorants draping black wings over encrusted piers, and people, more people than she'd ever seen, moving on streets, hailing boats, lifting gray bundles of nets into view.

She clapped her hands in delight and turned to Asam, thinking this illusion was created just for her. Until now she had considered him a petty creature, like the gulls and the scuttling crabs, but now she saw that he was more like the rats, for he too knew how to craft reality to suit his will.

Asam thought she clapped to see the city, and his heart swelled with joy. Who would have thought, when he set out from this dock a mere year before, that he could return in such glory? A third son, with a princess in tow, and stories to tell of a strange island where riches still might wait to be discovered. He smiled at the girl and took her hand.

"Soon," he promised, "I will show you all the treasures I have spoken of, and lay them at your feet."

The captain smiled thinly at his words. The girl unnerved him, though he could not quite say why. His instincts, which had always served him well in the past, told him it would be a bad idea to linger in this harbor. He had planned to haggle with the boy's father for extra gold and silver; now he thought it would be better to collect the reward immediately. He signaled orders to his first mate: plan to sail on the next tide.

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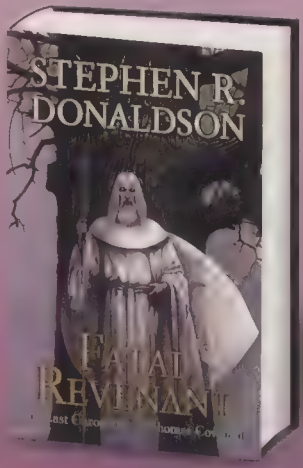

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And so the crew of the *Wind's Hope* were the last to see the city of Ir in its days of glory. Some who heard their story called them lucky, but as the story spread they found their luck grew sour: no one who had heard the ship's tale would buy goods, or hire its crew. Eventually the owner sold the ship at a loss to a privateer who liked its reputation. The captain drank himself to death, and his crew moved on to other things, under other names. Soon none remained who admitted to having been aboard the *Wind's Hope* save the rats, and they thought such things best forgotten.

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Those who disembarked that day in Ir were greeted with all the ceremony that befits the miraculous recovery of the third son of a wealthy merchant. Some sun dancers had been hired to prepare their way, and a Kereat priest scattered seaflowers before the feet of Asam and his strange companion. All the minor traders with petitions before Asam's father gathered on the docks to pay homage.

Asam's father himself came to the dock—an unusual honor—to thank the crew of the *Wind's Hope*, and speak of the favor shown to his family by the gods. It was a shortened version of the speech he planned to give that evening to the trade council, prior to requesting a legal decision in his favor regarding the rearrangement of the silk dockyard.

His smile faltered somewhat when Asam presented to him the girl who had pulled him from the sea. She reminded him of a string of fishbones, white and angular. Like them she had no obvious monetary value. So the merchant kept his smile fixed as his son sung the wild girl's praises. He is young, he thought, and there has been no formal declaration. He will learn.

The witchgirl noticed none of the tension that rose in the family when she stepped inside their greenwood doors. The first wife greeted Asam with the slight bow befitting a third son, but she did not register the witchgirl's presence, even with a smile.

Asam bristled at the insult. He bristled more when his father took it upon himself to introduce his companion as "the honored servant, into whose care the gods had delivered the third son of his house."

"They intend to part us," he told the witchgirl as evening fell over the rooftops of Ir. "My father considers you an inappropriate consort. They would have put you in the servant's quarters, if I had not insisted otherwise."

The witchgirl stood on the vine-laden balcony of the guest's quarters, drinking in the strange smell of the city. At first Asam thought she had not heard, but then he saw by the tilt of her head that she was considering what he had said.

This is what I like best about her, he thought, the way she thinks so carefully about what I have said. There were few in his life who showed him the same respect.

"These others," she said, each word a pebble flicked down a deep well. "They seek to thwart your will."

"In this place my father's will is law, Caitlai," he said, miserably. "When I brought you back with me, I did not stop—I did not think he—"

"Then change it," she interrupted him. She turned, eyes glittering like wet stones. "Change it back to the old place. There were no others there, only gulls."

She thought for a moment, then added, "The birds will not oppose us. They know better."

Asam sorted through her speech as best he could, stitching together a meaning he understood.

"I might, perhaps, take you back to the island," he sighed, "but in a different season. I do not have the money to raise a ship now, and my father will not lend me any."

"You say this 'father' has power only in this place," she said, "so change it." She turned away from him, facing back toward the ocean. "This place has grown dull. If you will not change it, I will."

The tide had changed. The *Wind's Hope* had left the harbor, its sails swelling with the rising breeze. In the hold, the rats writhed in anxious knots. On the deck the captain looked back toward Ir, his stomach clenching with inexplicable apprehension. The walls of the city glowed red in the light of the setting sun.

The girl on the balcony closed her eyes.

Silently, smoothly, the ocean rose. Water crept over the docks, over the streets, over the beggars huddled in doorways and the sailors killing time by the docks. It surged through the houses that clung to the cliffs, filling their rooms with seaweed and brine. Rats drowned in the offal trenches. Dogs drowned on their chains. Humans drowned pounding on ceilings, or struggling up through underwater streets toward light that no longer existed.

Beneath the witchgirl's feet the jadewood of the balcony fused into white, glossy stone. And the stone spread, just as the water did, gathering momentum as it surged through the house. Tapestries, furniture, the servants in the galley, the merchant sitting in his counting room, the wives kneeling on the bare floor of the women's quarter, the swallows nesting beneath the arched windows—all were petrified, smoothed, absorbed in the white walls that rose around her.

"There," the witchgirl said. She opened her eyes, to find everything as it should be. She was standing in a white oval room overlooking the sea. Her box was there, under the bed. So was her crystal.

Asam had vanished.

It took the witchgirl a moment to notice his absence, and then she felt only confusion. Had he not thought to come back with her?

She stretched her thoughts into the stones of her tower, passing over the muffled agony of the servants, the baffled fury of the merchant in his counting house. She could not sense the shipwrecked man anywhere. But then she had not willed him into anything—she had assumed he would will himself here beside her.

And yet he was missing. Her thoughts turned, wheeling in the dark. Such a miserable creature, to imitate her with his whims. She did not know where the shipwrecked man had gone. She supposed he was here somewhere, watching like the rats had watched her on the ship. But he was not important to her; she did not want him back. She would prove this to him.

She picked up her shoebox, and shook it, hearing the fingernails rustle over each other like leaves. Her dark eyes scanned the horizon, searching for ships.

Where one shipwrecked man had come, others could follow.

On the cold, bare rocks of the beach below, her gulls were already beginning to land. ❧

Beneath the witchgirl's feet the jadewood of the balcony fused into white, glossy stone. And the stone spread, just as the water did ...

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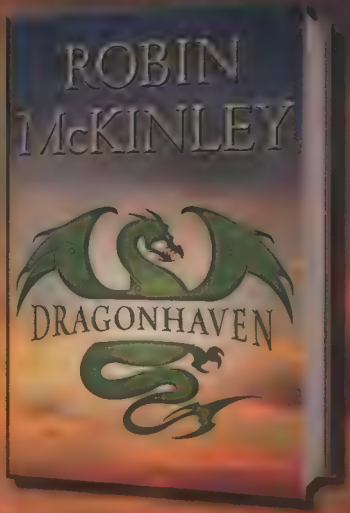

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By Eric T. Baker

The Darkness: It's all about harvesting hearts and shattering lightbulbs!

Games are like a lot of things in life: often how much a person enjoys them comes down to how closely their expectations of the what the experience is going to be like match what the experience actually is. Expectations for games are built by advertising (including the game's name and box art), the players' experience in similar games, and, of course, reviews. As an example, take ***The Darkness,*** for the Xbox 360 and the PS3 by Star Breeze Studios and from Take-Two Interactive, which is based on the comic book from Top Cow Productions. From the advertising, players might expect a *Doom*-style shoot 'em up with lots of blood and horror movie-style carnage. Based on experience with licensed games, players might expect a low budget that depends on the players' interest in the established characters to keep them playing.

And then there is the review, which has to give readers an honest impression of the game without overselling it. Off the top it has to be said that this reviewer has never read the comic book, so this review can't comment on whether the game is faithful to the source material or not. On the other hand, it can be said that players don't have to be familiar with the comic to enjoy the game. This is a very story-driven game. All the player needs to connect emotionally to the characters is in the game itself. What's more, there is nothing low budget about *The Darkness*. Everything from its graphics to its voice acting is top notch.

You don't have to be familiar with the comic book from Top Cow to enjoy playing The Darkness. *The main character uses pistol skills as well as supernatural powers.*

The game *The Darkness* resembles most is not *Doom* but *Max Payne*. The graphics are highly detailed and full of small touches and extra objects, many of them movable and shootable, which makes the game world closely resemble the real world. This detail extends to the character designs where the characters look and act realistically, from their layered, wrinkled clothing to their facial ticks and hand gestures when they speak. And as in *MP*, the story line is of one man and his guns vs. a city of gangsters and corrupt cops. The difference is that Jackie Estacado, the protagonist of *TD*, is possessed by a demonic force, so that instead of bullet time, he uses a variety of supernatural powers to augment his pistol skills.

There are a lot of little cutscenes in the game, and the designers took the time and money to create a number of monologues for Jackie that are shown at intervals and which really unveil the character

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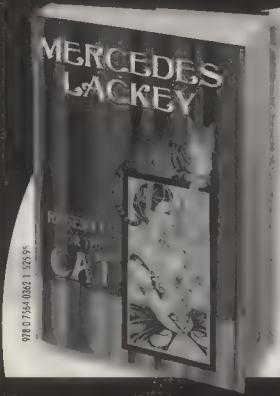

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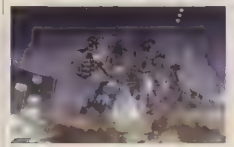


and the situation These scenes are not just good for a game They are good period

As for the gameplay itself, *TD* does follow the shooter formula of "kill lots of bad guys, get more guns, get more powers, kill more bad guys, and so on." The demon powers add two chores to this formula, harvesting hearts and breaking lightbulbs The way the player increases the number and power of demon abilities is by tearing the hearts from dead enemies. It is like looting bodies in an RPG, only bloodier. Also, the demon powers recharge in darkness and fade in light, so the first thing a player does upon entering any area of the game is shoot out all the lights There are a lot of lights and a lot of enemies in the game

So, for players who want a hard bitten, tough-talking, gunplay and shattered glass-filled interactive story, *The Darkness* fits the bill exactly The repetitive elements are more than made up for by all the entertaining ones

Vampire Rain, from Microsoft's Game Sudio and for the 360, is also about expectations The name, the cover, the trailers all suggest a sort of death commandos vs. the monsters game. The Initiative (from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) cracking down on a vampire infestation that no slayer has turned up to handle Squads of well-armed humans vs. the ferocity of the supernatural And there are elements of these expectations in the game, but overall it is not like this at all *VR* can be best categorized as a stealth horror game, much more like *Resident Evil* than *Buffy*

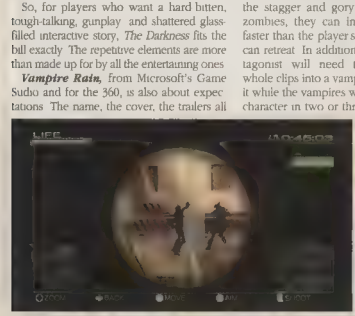
The thing players have to know going into this game is that even though the vampires have the stagger and gory looks of zombies, they can in fact run faster than the player's character can retreat In addition, the protagonist will need to empty whole clips into a vampire to kill it while the vampires will kill the character in two or three blows

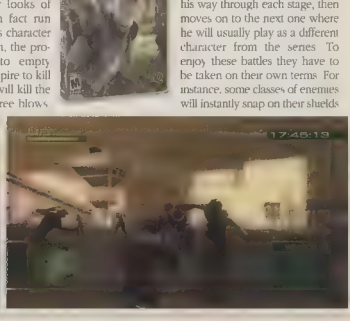
Surviving the game means not letting the vampires see the character in the first place The mini map displays a cone of what the vampires can see and what they can't, but the cone isn't exact, and many encounters will require reloading from the save point more than once before the player will be able to tell exactly where it is safe to travel and where it is not

The graphics and the voice acting of *VR* are not as good as those in *TD* and the story is not as well told The game doesn't have the repetitive killing and looting of *TD* but the accomplishment highs of surviving each map aren't the same as they would be if the game's combat were more survivable Oddly, this is partly the story's fault. It is just unclear why the player's character has to sneak around by himself against a city of vampires—at night—instead of being able to come in—during the day—with a few platoons of heavily armed infantry and just overwhelm the creatures

And then there is ***Transformers the Game***, from Activision for just about every game system on the market including the PC and the DS This game is completely in line with the player's probable expectations for a based on the movie" game The cutscenes are really good, but the game engine, created to work on so many different platforms and to handle main characters who are giant robots, is low on detail and smoothness The Autobots and the Decepticons, particularly in their giant robot forms, look pretty good, but the buildings, cars, and scenery they are smashing in their battles look more iconic than real

The game is played on open levels where the player, as either an Autobot or a Decepticon, is given a main mission and often some sub-missions In addition there are unlockables to find while exploring. The player fights his way through each stage, then moves on to the next one where he will usually play as a different character from the series To enjoy these battles they have to be taken on their own terms For instance, some classes of enemies will instantly snap on their shields





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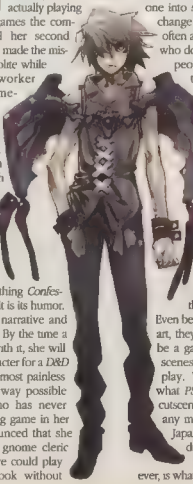
when shot at, meaning that they can only be defeated by getting them close to something explosive (tanker trucks are excellent for this) and blowing that up.

Overall, the game doesn't do a very good job of giving the player the feeling of "being in the movie," nor is it a great game on its own terms. For fans of *Transformers* it is probably worth renting, but there isn't enough to it for other players to enjoy.

Sometimes whole genres of gaming are closed to a player because of that player's expectations. For example, paper and dice roleplaying is a hobby that a lot of people simply have no interest in trying, and the majority of such people are female. What with one stereotype and another, women and girls, even if they know what roleplaying is, don't expect it to be something fun, much less something that a person would ever do more than once.

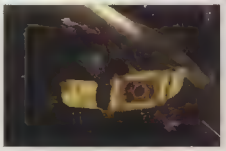
Shelly Mazzanoble takes on this expectation at book length in ***Confessions of a Part-Time Sorceress: A Girl's Guide to the Dungeons & Dragons Game***, published (not surprisingly) by Wizards of the Coast in paperback. Shelly is a self-described girly girl who had never played a roleplaying game until she went to work for Wizards. Even then, she never got involved in actually playing any of the many games the company makes, until her second year there when she made the mistake of being too polite while listening to a coworker expound on theme-dieval weaponry and how games get it wrong. Feigned attention resulted in an invitation to a *D&D* game, which she was too polite to refuse. And in going, she discovered that most of her expectations were wrong.

As a book the thing *Confessions* has going for it is its humor. It is part personal narrative and part player's guide. By the time a reader is finished with it, she will have created a character for a *D&D* game in about the most painless and humor-filled way possible. My own wife, who has never played a roleplaying game in her life, proudly announced that she was chaotic good gnome cleric and asked when we could play. She'd read the book without being pestered and created the character completely on her own, both of which are a tribute to how well and how entertainingly Shelly wrote it. Obviously, no book can make someone into something they're not, but it can change people's expectations, and that is often all that is needed. For both people who don't think they'd like *D&D* and for people who have friends and spouses they want to entice, this is an excellent entrée to the game and the hobby.



Sometimes, of course, a player's expectations are perfectly in line with the experience of playing a game. For instance, ***Project Sylpheed***, for the Xbox 360 from Game Arts by way of Square Enix, is a space flight sim from the same Japanese publisher who does the *Final Fantasy* games. Even before players see the box art, they can expect that it will be a game with beautiful cut-scenes and confusing gameplay. Which is pretty much what *PS* is. The rendered, CGI cutscenes could be the basis of any main-stream anime from Japan, and the English voice dubbing is pretty good.

The gameplay, however, is what it is. Someday there will be a dog-fight game for people who don't like dogfight games, and when it is launched, it will contain many of the elements that *PS* has. For instance, once the player picks a target, a track in the HUD displays the range from the player's fighter to the target. That display is marked so that the player knows when the target is in range of his various weapons. This is fantastically handy. The point of view can be made to follow the targeting enemy, which is also very helpful in flying. And the missiles in the game do a great job of homing in so that the player can kill most of the enemies with missile fire alone instead of having to deal with the frustration of trying to keep beam weapons on a twisting, dodging enemy long enough to kill them.



In other ways, though, *PS* is just like other dogfight games. Although the player is supposed to be battling other fighters and even capital ships, most of the time what he sees is a screen full of dots. The dots are well marked so the player can tell friend from foe, but the contrast between the cutscenes, where slick fighter craft give one another lengthy chase, and the game itself where the player points himself at a dot that briefly flashes to the size of another fighter and then is gone from view, is disappointing. So, with *PS*, people who enjoy dogfight games will enjoy this one.

Similarly, another Japanese game, ***Soul Nomad and the World Eaters*** from NIS America for the

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PS2, is a turn-based, squad- level, tactical RPG. The world has been nearly destroyed by the World Eaters, but a young boy or girl (the players get to choose which they want to play, although the art for the characters is identical; only the pronouns in the dialogue change) is given a magical sword and sent on a quest to destroy them. In the course of the quest, the character gains allies and formations to deploy them in so that by the end of the game virtual armies of characters are facing off against each other. And the character has enough power to beat the World Eaters.

What makes *SN* different from other games of this type is that the magic sword is powered by the evil god trapped in it. Named Gig, he once commanded the World Eaters, but now he is pretty much reduced to making cruel comments and lending his power to the player's character. The good part of having an evil god on the player's side is that he or she can do things not usually possible in a game like this, such as robbing the various stores and smashing up the towns. The bad side is that Gig is really annoying. The player is in the same circumstance as the character in the game: forced to listen to the god's jibes and unable to get along without his help. Many players will enjoy Gig and the game as well, but for players who don't like him, there is no escape.❧

books

Continued from page 38

Not Flesh Nor Feathers, Cherie Priest, Tor, New York, 361 pp., trade paperback, $14.95, ISBN 978-0-7653-1310-2.

Cherie Priest writes revitalized Gothic in a style that's realistic, muscular, and comfortable. In her latest, *Not Flesh Nor Feathers*, the wronged dead are rising along the banks of the Tennessee River near Chattanooga. The psychic Eden Moore must figure out why, and what they want, before they add more of the living to their ranks. Yes, that's right—Priest has written what's basically a zombie novel, in a down-home Southern style. While the plot offers little that will be new to many readers, Moore is a fascinating character and Priest creates a great contemporary, shop-worn view of Tennessee. There's a kind of effortlessness to the story as it unfolds that speaks to Priest's ability to be both "hip" and timeless. Based on the evidence here, her great strength as a writer is in re-creating old myths for a new generation of readers. *Not Flesh Nor Feathers* is billed as a "stand-alone" sequel to Priest's previous novels *Four and Twenty Blackbirds* and *Wings to the Kingdom*. Not having read those books, I can tell you *Not Flesh Nor Feathers* does, indeed, stand alone, triumphantly so.

The Coyote Road: Trickster Tales, Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling (eds.), Viking, New York, 514pp., hardcover, $19.99, ISBN 978-0-670-06194-5.

Featuring stories from a stunning variety and number of writers, this latest anthology from Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling focuses on the trickster myth—perhaps the most fertile folktale for these kinds of "retellings." Highlights include Kelly Link's "The Constable of Abal," Jedediah Berry's "The Other Labyrinth," and the wonderfully-titled "The Evolution of Trickster Stories Among the Dogs of North Park After the Change" by Kij Johnson. Although a couple of writers—like the usually superb Jeffrey Ford with the dull "The Dreaming Wind"—don't do much with their concept, these are exceptions in what is otherwise a lively, clever, and fun anthology. A long, informative introduction by Terri Windling sets out the origins and permutations of the trickster myth, while recommended reading lists add additional value. Clearly the one of the best of the Datlow-Windling fairy tale anthologies, *The Coyote Road* should be required reading not just for a young adult audience but for anyone who loves a good tale told well. ❧

Jeff VanderMeer

hot water

Continued from page 65

Their confusion didn't go away, but the directive was simple and they obeyed. Soon the great chant had been replaced with the muted sound of simple prayers.

"He's teaching," I said finally. "That's what he's doing, isn't it?"

Kenji looked up at the small figure kneeling in front of the goddess, and there was open admiration in his voice. "The young fool."

"Well, I did suggest that he explain himself to the goddess, but taking that explanation to this level was his idea. Doomed, probably, but you have to admire the attempt."

"You're insane, the pair of you," Master Kagyo said. "Kenji-san, please find a monk to replace that fool Hoshi and start again."

Kenji feigned shock. "Master Kagyo, all living beings are on the same path. Even the gods. Would you have me attack such a one while she was hearing the Word of the Buddha?"

Master Kagyo scowled but clearly knew better than to press the matter. "What if this doesn't work?"

I sighed. "If she doesn't boil him alive today, she'll probably do it tomorrow. Or the next day, or the next. Until then, the spring is perfectly safe. It's in your interest not to interfere."

"And after she kills him?"

"Assuming she does so, her betrayal is avenged. I'm guessing that the goddess of the mountain will no longer be so angry. She's fading, you know. In my opinion it was only her anger that made her as strong as she was. A little time will solve your problem if Hoshi does not. On the other hand, if he should succeed ..."

"Impossible," Master Kagyo said.

"Perhaps. Yet how many temples can number a goddess among their devotees?"

Master Kagyo's anger faded as he apparently considered the possibilities. I was content to let him. We left Master Kagyo and his monks there. Kenji wanted to remain, but followed me when I asked. "We're leaving tomorrow," I said, once we were out of earshot. "The one week Prince Kanemore required of us will be concluded."

"Leave now? With those lovely hot springs available again? May I ask why?"

"Why? I was brought here against my will, fed nothing but millet and pickles, and then I was almost boiled to death! Not to mention letting myself be put in the rather spiritually dubious position of agreeing to kill a goddess. You need to ask why?"

"Yes I do. Why? And this time tell the truth."

"Because," I said, "I need a drink."

Kenji sighed. "Very well."

I blinked. "No arguments? Now I have to ask why."

"Except for the 'against my will' part, my story is the same as yours," Kenji said. "I could use a drink myself."❧

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